

Institution: The Department of Politics and International Relations, Aston University

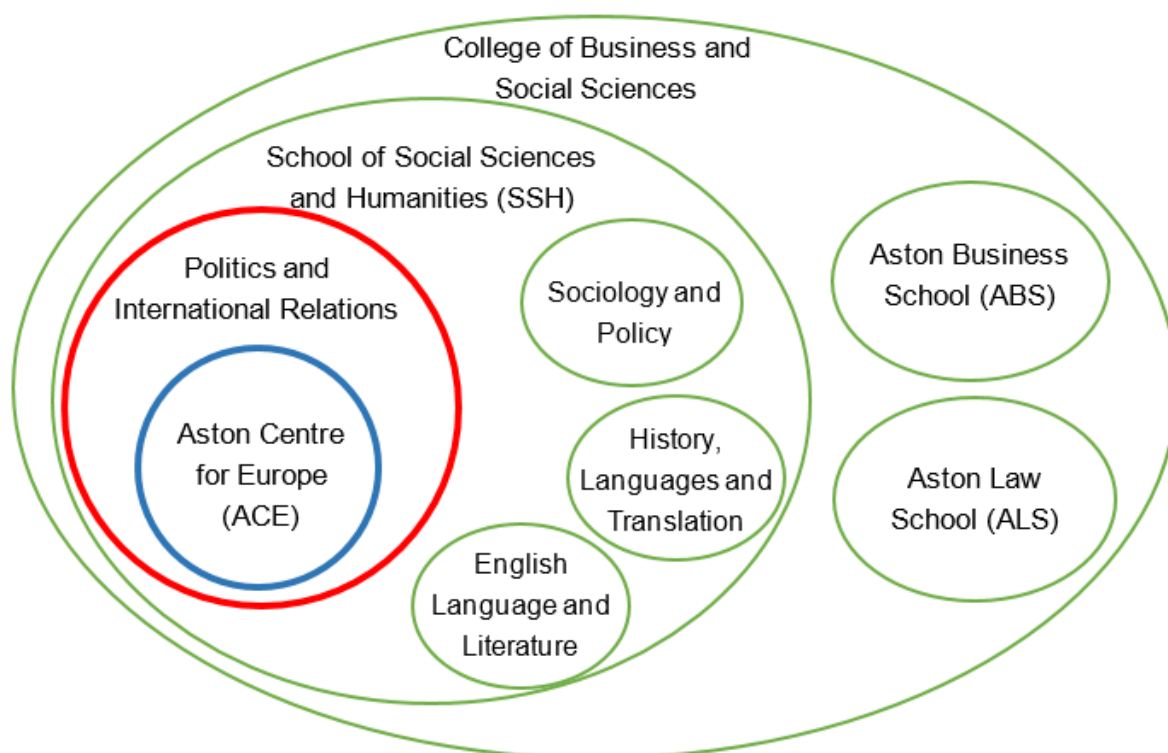
Unit of Assessment: 25 Area Studies

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

Context and Structure

Area Studies at Aston is embedded in the University's tradition of research and teaching in European studies, languages, politics, modern history and society. The Unit of Assessment (UoA) corresponds to the Department of Politics and International Relations (PIR) in the School of Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH), part of the College of Business and Social Sciences (see Figure 1). In line with trends across the University (Institutional Level Environment Statement [ILES-1.3]), our research in Area Studies has expanded significantly since REF2014 due to strategic growth in staff numbers. From 5 FTE submitted to RAE2008 (UoA 50), to 12 FTE entered for REF2014 (UoA 27), the UoA is now a vibrant community of 27.6 FTE research-active scholars. Building on the strengths recognised by REF2014, we have developed into one of the country's leading Area Studies units, with deep expertise across a range of countries and regions, and embedding impact as well as public engagement in all our research.

Figure 1. The UoA and its position within the University



Our post-2014 investment in staff has had three key effects.

1. Our expertise on Europe has broadened to cover a wider range of European Union (EU) policy areas and a larger number of European countries. This research activity is coordinated by the Department's Research Centre, the Aston Centre for Europe (ACE). Since being launched in 2009, ACE has become one of the UK's leading multidisciplinary centres of expertise on European politics and policy-making. Building on our success in REF2014, ACE has gained international recognition for the excellence of its scholarship, as evidenced by a three-year Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence award from the European Commission (2016-19). Our recruitment strategy over this REF period has allowed us to extend our research agenda to three principal themes:

- a. Politics and policies of the European Union: Copsey (foreign policy, neighbourhood policy), Glencross (economic and monetary policy), religious interest groups (Leustean), Jenichen (human rights and minority policies), Rowe (regional and cohesion policy), Szent-Ivanyi (development policy);
 - b. British politics (Atkins, Gaffney, Glencross, Fitzpatrick, Akhtar);
 - c. Politics, policy-making and society in European countries, covering
 - i. Western Europe: Germany (Green, Jenichen, Rowe, Turner) and France (Gaffney and Glencross)
 - ii. Southern Europe: Spain (Correa Vila and Gray); Italy (Vampa) and Greece (Trantas).
 - iii. Eastern Europe: Poland (Rozbicka); Hungary (Szent-Ivanyi), Serbia (Obradovic-Wochnik), and Romania (Leustean).
2. During the assessment period, we made a strategic decision to expand our expertise beyond Europe, to focus on politics and international relations in Asia, and Europe's relations with the continent. This choice was designed to broaden the UoA's intellectual agenda and align with the UK's changing policy priorities after Brexit. Investment in new staff successfully diversified the geographical areas covered by the UoA by expanding expertise on politics, international relations, and security in Asia; including China (Miao, Thomas), India (Kim), Pakistan (Akhtar) South-East Asia (Southgate, Wunderlich), Korea (Grzelczyk) and Turkey (Gürsoy).

The result of this expansion is the UoA's ability to conduct internationally leading research using European and Asian area expertise in the following disciplinary subfields: political leadership, migration and refugees, foreign aid and development, federalism and decentralization, critical security studies, religion and politics, gender, political populism, interest groups, social democracy, international organisations, international law, and foreign policy. To do so, our scholars employ a wide range of methodological tools, including qualitative techniques such as interviewing, ethnography, rhetorical analysis, and text analysis; as well as quantitative methods, especially multilevel, panel and cross-sectional regression analysis.

Our enhanced research strengths are underpinned by growth in our combined research funding success over this REF period. We have increased research income from £584,845 (REF2014) to £1,057,093, with grants secured from a wider range of funders, including the ESRC, the Leverhulme Trust and the European Commission (Section 3).

3. Finally, we have extended our ability to engage with a variety of audiences and stakeholders. Our engagement with policy-makers has grown significantly, including work with the UK and other national governments and several legislatures, including the UK and Scottish parliaments.

Most importantly, we have engaged heavily with UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO; now Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, FCDO). Copsey was seconded to the FCO in 2015, and two further colleagues were successful in winning competitively awarded further secondments: Turner (2018-2020) and Szent-Ivanyi (2021-23). Further details on our extended ability to engage with our stakeholders is provided below.

Research and impact strategy

Aston's Area Studies submission in REF2014 confirmed our reputation as a leading centre of expertise on European politics and international relations. Since 2014, we have pursued a research and impact strategy designed to strengthen this position further. Research in Area Studies is guided by the current Research Strategy of both the University (ILES-2.3) and the College of Business and Social Science, which aims to ensure that Aston research is (1) impactful, (2) collaborative, (3) excellent, and (4) financially sustainable.

(1) *Research Impact (ILES-2.6)*. Public-facing work plays a central role in our intellectual endeavours. To that end, we have a two-pronged strategy for supporting impact: direct collaboration and consultancy with government departments; and working with different organisations to stage policy-focused workshops and other events. There is significant support available for colleagues aiming to enhance the impact of their work. The University supports impact through a competitive Impact Fund (ILES-4.13), and the UoA has benefitted through funds for organizing stakeholder-facing events. ACE also offers competitive seed funding for impact generation. These funds were further complemented between 2016 and 2019 by a €95,000 Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence award from the European Commission, allowing ACE to extend its engagement with research users. Finally, a School-level “Impact Champion” has been appointed to raise the general culture of pursuing impactful research, through mentoring colleagues in developing impact case studies, running workshops to identify best practice, and disseminating knowledge (ILES-4.12).

These initiatives have contributed to a significantly enhanced impact profile for the UoA:

- We have forged strong links with the UK government and Civil Service. Two of our staff members have been seconded to the FCO (Copsey in 2015, Turner in 2018), with a third staff member being awarded a secondment in March 2020, to start in 2021 (Szent-Ivanyi). Turner and Szent-Ivanyi's secondments are both funded by the AHRC-ESRC-FCO Knowledge Exchange Scheme. Furthermore, staff have worked with British embassies in Europe (Copsey, Glencross, Gray and Turner), and have provided consultancy for the devolved administrations (Rowe and Gray) and the Home Office (Akhtar, Farrand-Carrapico). Colleagues have also provided evidence or have engaged in other ways with Parliament (Akhtar, Glencross, Obradovic-Wochnik, Beattie, Rozbicka).
- ACE has organized a wide range of policy-focused events, working with think tanks such as the Policy Network, the Foreign Policy Centre, the Institute for Public Policy Research, or the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. Together with these and other partners, ACE has organized 21 policy-focused events during the REF period, including nine seminars in the Houses of Parliament. Under the Jean Monnet Centre, ACE hosted nine policy workshops on topics such as EU-China relations, young people and politics, international development, internal security, European (dis-)integration and religious minorities.

The overall success of our impact strategy is reflected in the three impact case studies that are part of our submission: (1) Helping the UK government adapt to the changing UK-Europe relationship (Copsey, Turner, Glencross, Gürsoy, Szent-Ivanyi, Rowe); (2) European and UK Internal Security Governance post-Brexit (Farrand-Carrapico); (3) Informing policy-makers, advocacy organisations, NGOs and public debate about the injustices suffered by asylum seekers and migrants on Europe's Balkan borders (Obradovic-Wochnik, Beattie, Rozbicka).

(2) *Research Collaboration (ILES-2.7)*. We place great emphasis on collaborative research within and outside the University. This allows us to foster a culture of teamwork and encourage staff to build their research networks and thus produce more impactful research. Section 4 provides more details, but a key highlight in promoting collaboration is our fortnightly departmental staff seminar series, launched in 2015, which has facilitated the emergence of new collaborative research projects during the assessment period. These include joint work within the UoA on Brexit (Glencross, Gray, Gürsoy, Szent-Ivanyi, Turner), social democracy (Turner and Vampa), political rhetoric (Atkins and Gaffney), politics in Southern Europe (Correa Vila, Gray, Gürsoy and Vampa), interest groups (Rozbicka and Szent-Ivanyi), and refugees (Beattie, Obradovic-Wochnik, Rozbicka). Interdisciplinary links beyond the UoA (ILES-2.9) have also led to joint projects, such as Miao's collaboration with the College of Engineering and Physical Sciences in successfully bidding for an EU Horizon2020 RISE grant.

We resource the development of collaborative links through funding from ACE and SSH. ACE has seed-funded collaborative work, including the #IR_Aesthetics project examining the Balkans refugee route (Beattie, Obradovic-Wochnik, Rozbicka, together with Liverpool University), and a project on the live music industry post-Brexit (Rozbicka, with Birmingham City University and Newcastle University). SSH supports international collaboration through funding for conference

participation (increased from £400 per academic year in 2014/15 to £1500 in 2020/21). Further international networking is promoted by the University's International Collaboration Fund (ILES-2.9), which has funded seven visits from distinguished fellows during the REF cycle. Two of these visits have resulted in collaborative grant applications, including a successful bid to the International Visegrad Fund, involving a collaboration with four Central European academic institutions.

(3) *Research Excellence (ILES-2.4)*. We have introduced a number of initiatives to give colleagues the time and support to target leading publication outlets and competitive funding schemes. In addition to support existing before 2014 (such as a system of research leave, term-time research days ring-fenced from teaching, and research mentoring), we have engaged with the University's Grant Writing Programme (ILES-4.5), increased funding for fieldwork and conferences, introduced writing retreats, support for monographs and large scale funding applications, and measures to support both early career researchers (ECRs) and female academics. These initiatives support research excellence and staff development (*Section 2*).

Overall, this strategy has fostered a productive research culture where staff at all levels have sufficient support to work on excellent research. Members of the UoA have successfully targeted publication venues at the forefront of their disciplines. This REF return includes papers in the *Journal of European Public Policy*, *Political Geography*, the *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, or *West European Politics*. The submission also includes 20 monographs with publishers that have global reach, including Oxford UP, Cambridge UP, Palgrave, Routledge, and Michigan UP. Our processes to peer review outputs include constructive feedback to authors, which supports continuous improvement.

(4) *Financial Sustainability (ILES-2.8)*. The final component of our research strategy focuses on ensuring access to sufficient resources for research, mainly through increasing external grant capture and improving the funder mix. The UoA's staffing strategy, including the support made available for funding applications is detailed in Section 2. The increase in staff research allowances from £400 in 2014 to £1,500 annually, ACE's two annual competitive calls for seed-funding, SSH's support for large collaborative grants (travel allowances and teaching buyout), and a pre-submission peer review system are examples of the strategic support tools newly put in place to support grant applications (*Section 2*). Support for ECRs, which is strategically mapped to the Vitae Framework (ILES-3.13 and 3.14), has been especially important, given how the UoA's investment in additional staff has focused on this group: 12 out of the 17 hires made during the REF cycle were ECRs. Furthermore, the University provides a structured programme of support via its Research and Knowledge Exchange Service (RKE) (*Section 3*, but also ILES-4.4 and 4.5).

The combined success of these initiatives is shown by 37 research grant awards during the REF cycle, totalling £1,431,154.

Future strategic aims

Our research strategy has enabled us to strengthen ACE's international reputation for research excellence and enhance its visibility towards research beneficiaries. The UK's withdrawal from the EU reinforced the relevance of the study of Europe and we have become a key source of Brexit-related information and guidance for government, business, and civil society (*Section 4*). Our immediate aim is to consolidate and build upon our position at the interface between academia and policy in the post-2021 REF cycle.

To this end, we are conscious of Europe's changing status in international affairs – and the UK's role within that process. Outside of Europe, our emerging area of focus is Asia and Europe-Asia relations. In addition to our existing scholars (Grzelczyk, Thomas, and Wunderlich), new appointments during the assessment period (Miao, Kim, Southgate, Akhtar and Gürsoy) have allowed us to build up a critical mass of expertise on Asian countries; the next step is to develop our reputation as a centre of expertise in the area. We have made initial steps towards this ambition, such as strengthening our publication record, organizing events (including one on

Europe-China relations in the framework of our Jean Monnet grant), and building relations with regional universities (Section 4).

Key to success in pursuing this strategy is an increase in external funding capture, for which we are well positioned, as many of our ECRs will emerge as independent PIs during the next REF cycle. We will support them in this aim by strengthening our mentoring system and encouraging an even greater degree of collaboration between more experienced colleagues and ECRs, as well as making use of the School's and the University's enhanced research support structures (Section 3). This will sustain and embed our vibrant research culture.

Organisational changes within Aston University will open up further collaboration opportunities for the UoA. As of August 2020, SSH operates as part of a new entity, the College of Business and Social Sciences, together with Aston Business School (ABS) and Aston Law School (ALS). Given the interdisciplinary nature of many calls for funding, the new college structure presents an opportunity for UoA staff to seek out collaboration with colleagues working in the fields of business and management, economics, and legal studies. We have developed a strategy on how to make the most of these opportunities, focusing on encouraging bottom-up research cooperation through (1) joint events between different research centres in the College (especially with the Lloyds Banking Group Centre for Business Prosperity, the Centre for Research in Ethnic Minority Entrepreneurship, and the Centre for Research Into Safety and Security); (2) active "matchmaking" between colleagues with similar interests; and (3) a new Centre for Forced Migration and Displacement, with a membership drawn from PIR, ABS, ALS, and other SSH departments.

Section 2. People

Staffing Strategy

Investment in academic staff in this REF cycle was motivated by three goals: (i) enhancing core expertise in EU politics and policies, alongside the politics and public policies of European states; (ii) extending the geographical coverage of our research outside of Europe, with a focus on Asia; and (iii) extending research expertise in thematic areas like political economy, gender studies, international relations, and security studies, as well as diversifying our methodological expertise towards quantitative methods. This staffing strategy, as outlined in Section 1, thus consolidated our core European-focused strengths within an expanded research capacity in further geographic areas, and analytical and methodological tools.

This strategy has created a well integrated research community that has more than doubled in size from REF2014. This staff group is characterised by its stability, which we regard as a further indication of the quality of the research environment we have fostered: there have been just three departures of permanent academic staff since REF2014. The current staff group focuses on complementary research agendas which facilitates a rich research culture.

Staff development

The UoA's staff development strategy has been strengthened considerably over the assessment period, with a view to support colleagues in producing excellent research. Each staff member enjoys professional development opportunities through a University-wide "My Development Conversation" (MDC) process (ILES-3.8), to reflect and plan on individual research performance and strategy, and identify appropriate targets for each academic year. MDC also provides opportunities to discuss career development, and provides support for these in terms of identifying training needs and the specific steps colleagues need to undertake for promotion. Additional advice has been available to staff since 2016; the Head of SSH hosts an annual workshop on promotions, career planning and professional progression.

The Institutional Level Environment Statement (Section 3) details a wide range of university policies and measures aimed to support the career development of colleagues, including career

development courses, courses to attain Higher Education Academy (HEA) recognition, resources on mentoring, and an Impact Fund (ILES-4.13). The School and the UoA also support staff development with a focus on evolving research profiles. These measures include:

1. A formalized and transparent written policy for study leave (ILES-3.11); colleagues are eligible to apply for one semester of study leave in seven. Applications are supported through consultations with the Head of PIR and departmental research directors.
2. A school-wide workload system, introduced in 2015, to ensure fair teaching loads regardless of seniority.
3. A research support allowance, which provides £1,500 per year for each colleague to fund the costs of fieldwork, attending conferences, or other research expenses.
4. A scheme to support monograph completion, under which colleagues can apply for a semester of teaching relief (above and beyond regular study leaves).
5. A seed-funding scheme for large grant applications. Staff can apply for up to £2,500 to facilitate networking with collaborators or to fund short-term teaching buyout.
6. Each colleague benefits from a weekly timetabled “research day” without teaching or administrative meetings.
7. An annual residential writing retreat to give colleagues additional time to work on large grant applications or monographs.
8. ACE has an annual budget which rose from £5,000 in 2017/18 to £10,000 in 2018/19, for specific public-facing events. ACE also publishes two competitive calls per year to support small-scale fieldwork and impact activities, and seed-fund larger ones.

Opportunities for staff development are further provided by a bi-weekly seminar series for academic staff, also open to PGR students. This is a key forum for the presentation of early drafts of research papers and grant proposals, providing an important source of internal peer feedback and contact points for collaboration.

The UoA's staffing strategy has focused on recruiting outstanding ECRs with a high potential to contribute future research excellence. During the assessment period, these appointments have included Correa Vila (f), Farrand Carrapico (f), Fitzpatrick (m), Gray (f), Hammond (m), Jenichen (f), Kim (f) Miao (f), Nitoiu (m), Rozbicka (f), Southgate (f) and Szent-Ivanyi (m). On the census date, five of these individuals were still ECRs. Supporting their development in particular has been a priority; specific support for ECRs includes:

1. A start-up fund of £5,000 to support their research.
2. A reduced teaching and administrative workload allocation in the first three years following appointment.
3. A provision to take a first study leave period a semester earlier than for other staff.
4. In line with university policies (ILES-3.9), mentoring provided by an established staff member, including advice, coaching, and a safe space to discuss potential problems. The mentor has an especially strong role in supporting the development of the ECR's research profile, by advising on publication strategies and grant applications.
5. An ECR network within the School, which organizes regular meetings between ECRs to discuss the specific issues they face, and feedback collectively to School and University management. This network is always led by an ECR.
6. The University also provides an ECR Forum, as well as an ECR Development Programme and a Graduate School Training Programme, elements of which are also open to ECRs (ILES-3.14).

As an Area Studies research group, a further element of our staffing strategy has focused on ensuring that the majority of staff speak at least one additional language beyond English. The UoA has fluency in French, German, Spanish, Italian, Hungarian, Catalan, Portuguese, Mandarin, Korean, Serbian, Turkish, Urdu, Punjabi, Romanian, Russian, Polish, and Greek. Fluency in these languages enhances our ability to produce excellent research by allowing access to sources and research participants in local languages. It also increases our ability to achieve impact by facilitating communication with local research beneficiaries.

The effectiveness of our staff development measures is most clearly visible in the career development of staff. The assessment period has seen the promotions of three Senior Lecturers to Reader (Grzelczyk, Leustean, Turner); and nine Lecturers to Senior Lecturer (Atkins, Beattie, Farrand Carrapico, Gürsoy, Obradovic Wochnik, Rozbicka, Szent-Ivanyi, Turner, Vampa). Three of these colleagues (Farrand Carrapico, Rozbicka and Szent-Ivanyi) began at Aston as ECRs at the start of the assessment period. Our successes in supporting the development of staff have also received external recognition: Farrand Carrapico was awarded a British Academy Rising Star award in 2017, while Gray was awarded the University's Best Newcomer award in 2018.

Support for PGR students

We seek to immerse PGR students into all facets of the Department's research culture. The Aston Graduate School (ILES-3.15) is responsible for maintaining the quality of the PGR programmes and the development of training in core research and transferable skills, while responsibility for running PGR programmes and student welfare lies with the Schools (ILES-3.16).

Aston University has been part of the ESRC Midlands Graduate School Doctoral Training Partnership (DTP) since 2016 where it is represented in the Area Studies and Business & Management Studies Pathways. Aston was appointed lead institution in the Area Studies Pathway in recognition of our results in UoA 27 in REF2014. The training of doctoral students in the UoA is structured through the ESRC DTP, with all research students enrolled on a School-wide programme. They all undertake core research methods training covering all core ESRC requirements: Research Design, Philosophy of the Social Sciences, Qualitative Research Methods, and Quantitative Research Methods. The modules are taught jointly by SSH (Philosophy of the Social Sciences and Qualitative Research Methods) and the Aston Business School (Research Design and Quantitative methods). All students enrolled on the PhD programme complete these four modules, regardless of whether they are ESRC funded or not.

As part of the Graduate School Training Programme (ILES-3.17), PGR students are required to complete 90 hours of research methods training (which includes 80 hours of Research Methods modules) during their three-year registration period. The students and supervisors map the training needs of the student at the beginning of every year, and match these to specific training courses. The Graduate School offers a comprehensive set of training activities, including courses regarding Qualifying Report preparation, viva preparation, academic writing and others. The library offers training for all staff and PhD students, where courses are specific to finding and using information, such as advanced literature searching, measuring impact of published articles, EndNote and publishing in journals. The University-wide Centre for English Language and Communication at Aston provides English language tuition for PhD students whose first language is not English (ILES-3.19).

PGR students have the opportunity to teach, and are remunerated at a set hourly rate. All students complete the Introduction to Learning and Teaching Practice (ILTP) course run by the University's central Education Team. The course is specifically aimed at PhD students embarking on their first teaching activities. PhD students are also eligible to sign up to the HEA-accredited PG Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, to obtain an associate or full HEA fellowship. The Careers and Placement Office at Aston provides advice to PhD students exploring careers outside of academia. Students have the opportunity to volunteer to act as PGR representatives on School committees and, as such, attend the School's Research Committee and the University's Graduate School Management Committee. This is an opportunity for students to understand the administration and workings of a higher education institution (ILES-3.15).

In addition, PGR students receive further support from SSH and the UoA. Research students in the UoA have a personal research fund of £1,000 over the course of their registration period (3/6 years for full and part time students respectively), to use for research activity including conferences, fieldwork, or summer schools. PGR students are also eligible to apply for fieldwork funding from ACE. The School supports and funds the PGR students' annual conference, which is run by the students themselves. Students have the opportunity to volunteer for the conference

organising committee and gain experience in event organisation, issuing calls for papers, and selecting abstracts. Furthermore, PGR students are fully embedded in the life of the UoA through opportunities for teaching, and participation in departmental research seminars. PGR student offices are located on the same corridor as the UoA academic staff are, which gives students significant opportunities to interact with colleagues.

Equality and diversity

We seek to create a diverse staff group and an environment which provides all colleagues with the same opportunities to achieve their full potential (ILES-3.4 and 3.5). The composition of the staff in the UoA is balanced in terms of gender, with a slight majority of female staff. This composition is reflected in the output attributions in this submission (Table 1, which also shows data on other protected characteristics). An analysis of variance of the means of attributions in protected characteristics highlighted no significant differences.

Table 1. Demographic details of Category A staff in the UoA

	Percentage of UoA FTE staff	Percentage of output attributions
Male	43	40
Female	57	60
White	60	66
BME	21	17
Unknown	18	16
Disabled	NA	NA
Not disabled	NA	NA
Unknown	NA	NA
31-40	45	49
41-50	49	45
51-60	3	2
60+	3	4

Table 2 shows further details on the composition of the UoA's membership.

Table 2. The gender and seniority composition of Category A staff in the UoA

	Male	Female
Professor	2	0
Reader	2	1
Senior Lecturer	4	6.6
Lecturer	3	8
Research fellow	1	0
Total	12	15.6

Female colleagues outnumber males on both the Senior Lecturer and Lecturer level. However, male colleagues are dominant in professorial and reader positions. The UoA represent colleagues of 14 nationalities.

The University has held Athena SWAN Silver award since 2018 (ILES-3.6), while the School has been granted an Athena SWAN Bronze award in 2020, the application for which was led by a UoA colleague (Jenichen). The Athena SWAN Working Group has been analysing staff and student data and reviewing the School's processes and procedures in relation to equality and diversity. The group confirmed good practice in relation to the School's policies on parental leave, the opportunities for flexible working to support colleagues with caring responsibilities, and support for

colleagues returning from leave (ILES-3.7). Examples of well-received School level policies include:

- Three female researchers have spent time on maternity leave over this REF period (one twice), and another has been on shared parental leave. Their absence has been supported by a “keeping in touch” (KIT) process, which includes 10 paid KIT days. This support process ensures that staff members remain connected to the UoA whilst on leave, allowing for a more seamless transition back to work.
- Applications to move to part-time work are treated sympathetically. During the assessment period, one female colleague has opted to return to work on a part-time basis after maternity leave.
- All UoA staff with caring responsibilities can apply for timetabling restrictions, which allow them to mark certain timeslots when they are not available for teaching. A clear policy has been developed to ensure parity in approving these requests. Furthermore, no School level administrative meetings are scheduled before 9:15 am or after 4:00. The School has made significant efforts to maintain these commitments during the Covid-19 pandemic as well.

The analysis by the School’s Athena SWAN Working Group has also revealed some issues, on which the School has taken action:

- Since 2014, 12% fewer women than men in SSH had applied for research grants; with women also 5% less successful than their male colleagues. In order to address this issue, the School introduced its first all-female writing retreat at the Bamford Quaker Community in Derbyshire in May 2018. Ten women took part, four of them ECRs and two of them researchers from the UoA. Following this, the School committed itself to supporting similar events annually, however the 2020 event was cancelled due to COVID. The School is committed to restarting this initiative when conditions permit.
- The analysis of the representation of women and men on major committees in the School between 2015 and 2017 showed that overall, more women than men served on these committees, thus reflecting the overall gender demographic of academic staff. The only areas where male colleagues tended to be equally or overrepresented are Management Committee, Research Committee, and Promotions Committee. Measures were taken in order to ensure that more women serve on Research Committee and that men develop a stronger interest in Learning & Teaching, Curriculum Development and Equality & Diversity. In May 2017, all chairs of major committees were asked to develop measures to increase the gender balance and reflect on gender-bias in chairing a committee meeting. A half-day training programme on gender-bias was held for all members of the School Management Committee by the University's HR department in June 2017. Female representation on Research Committee has increased from 21% in 2017 to 43% in 2018. The composition of Promotions Committee has moved to a policy of strict gender balance.
- To support female colleagues in their career progression and increase the number of women in senior positions, as part of our Athena SWAN commitments, we are in the process of putting in place an enhanced mentoring scheme for female colleagues, to help them with career planning and support them in the promotion process.

Further measures to promote equality and diversity during the assessment period included the following:

- For this REF return, Aston committed to a 100% submission of eligible staff. Section D of our [Code of Practice](#) sets out our process for selecting outputs, with the peer review process for outputs set out in more detail in Appendix 6. In SSH, two workshops were run for all staff to explain these processes, and those involved in selecting outputs also participated in a comprehensive EDI training session which was developed in conjunction with colleagues at Advance HE. Our selection of outputs 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). In this assessment, we have compared outputs attributed to all Category A staff (using FTE) with the outputs attributed to those with protected characteristics (gender, age, disability and ethnicity). The analysis highlighted no significant effect based on a protected characteristic in any of Aston’s Units of Assessment (see Table 1 above).

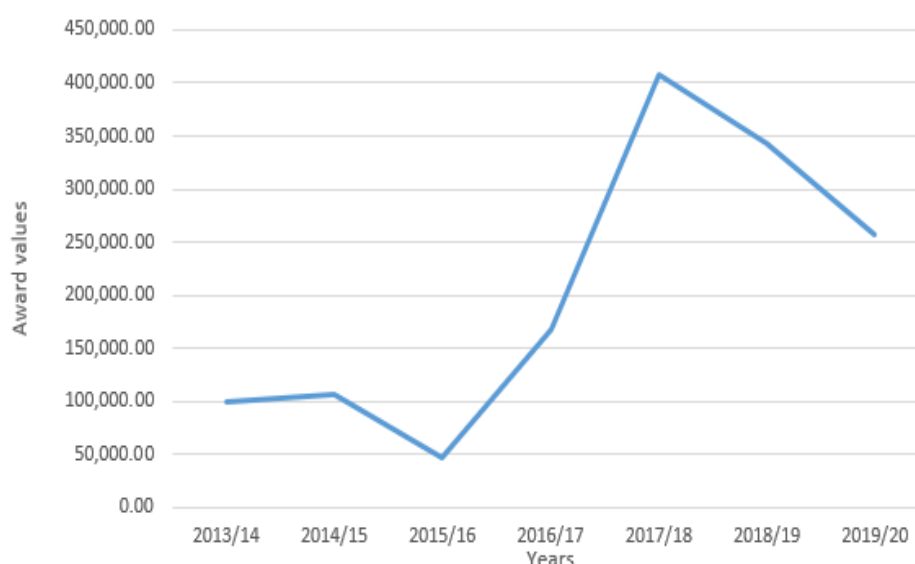
- Our Individual Circumstances process (Code of Practice, Appendix 7 and 8) was run centrally through RKE. In line with our commitment to an inclusive return, all employees who submitted a declaration of individual circumstances were invited to indicate if they would be like to be contacted by their HR Business Partner to discuss their circumstances and potential support needs.
- An HR Business Partner is now located within SSH to ensure that HR policies, including those focusing on supporting colleagues with caring and other responsibilities, are communicated and implemented.
- All staff involved in recruitment undertake training in equal opportunities and unconscious bias. Since 2016, unconscious bias training has been compulsory for all staff. While single-sex appointment panels have not been the practice in the UoA for the past decade, these have been formally abolished from 2017. Furthermore, all shortlists for appointments aim to be gender balanced.
- The School's Equality and Diversity Committee has been strengthened in 2019/20, and is embedded in The Aston People Network (ILES-3.5). The Committee oversees the implementation of SSH's commitments to E&D, and formulates new recommendations. The chair of the Committee attends the School's Management Committee meetings, and E&D issues are a standing item on the agenda. All Departments in the School are represented on the Committee by one female and one male colleague.

Section 3. Income, infrastructure and facilities

Income

In this REF period, our total research income is £1,057,093, an increase of more than 80% since REF2014. The UoA's researchers secured 37 externally funded research grant awards over the assessment period. We have enhanced the strength of our grant applications and diversified our funding sources, with the net result that UoA staff have received a total of £1,431,154 in external research grant awards, during the assessment period (see Figure 2 for an annual breakdown). This growth clearly demonstrates the success of the mechanisms we have put in place to give staff the resources and time to focus on research, including the generation of grant income (Section 2).

Figure 2. Research awards over the assessment period



The UoA's staffing strategy has focused on recruiting and developing promising ECRs, and supporting their capacity to secure external research funding. Although ECRs are generally less likely to secure large grants, the UoA has been able to grow its grant capture, and some of the staff members recruited as ECRs during the assessment period have been able to attract external

funding (see for example Szent-Ivanyi's project with the International Visegrad Fund, or Rozbicka's project on the Birmingham Live Music Industry).

During the assessment period, over half of UoA staff have been awarded external funding. We have focused on developing a more diverse and sustainable funding base, targeting both traditional funders (ESRC, British Academy, European Commission, Leverhulme Trust) whilst also successfully winning support from alternative academic (e.g. German Academic Exchange Service – DAAD, US Library of Congress, GCRF) and non-academic funding streams (e.g. International Visegrad Fund, British Institute of Ankara). Members of the UoA have also collaborated in projects based at other institutions, funded by the EU's Horizon 2020 programmes.

Our success in securing research grants and awards is spread across different research areas and staff at different career stages. Among the more substantial grants involving members of the UoA were:

- Leverhulme Trust Fellowship: 'The Rhetoric of Flag, Faith and Family in the Queen's Christmas Message'. £48,071 (2019-2021, Atkins).
- European Commission Marie Skłodowska-Curie Postdoctoral Fellowship: 'GO Religioscapes. Churches, Arks of Migratory Narratives'. €183,454 (2018-2020, Leustean and Trantas).
- Sustainable Development Programme of the Global Challenges Research Fund, awarded by the British academy: 'When States Fail: Forced Displacement, Religious Diplomacy and Human Security in the Eastern Orthodox World'. £175,219 (2018-2021, Leustean).
- German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD): 'The Contemporary Challenges of German Social Democracy'. £75,448 (2018-2020, Turner and Vampa).
- US Library of Congress: 'Klugge Fellowship'. \$51,600 (2019-2020, Hammond).
- Leverhulme Trust Fellowship: 'The Politics of Toys in Conflict and Post-Conflict Spaces'. £49,497 (2018-2019, Grzelczyk).
- AHRC-ESRC-FCO Knowledge Exchange Fellowship. £129,564 (2018-2020, Turner).
- AHRC-ESRC-FCO Knowledge Exchange Fellowship. £146,789 (2020-2022, Szent-Ivanyi).
- European Commission: 'AwarEU: Virtual learning Environment', Erasmus+ Key Action 3 £53,970 (2016-2019, Glencross).
- British Academy: 'Forced Migration, Religious Diplomacy and Human Security in the Eastern Orthodox World', £34,100 (2018, Leustean).
- AHRC Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre: 'Birmingham Live Music Project', £45,638 (2020, Rozbicka).

Infrastructure and facilities

Research in the UoA is actively supported by the School's Research Committee (chaired by the Associate Dean Research – ADR), in collaboration with the Management Committee and the Department's Research Directors. Research is also a standing item in all PIR departmental meetings. There are two Research Directors in the Department, who actively support grant applications and publications by colleagues through pre-submission peer review and informal advice. ACE has a pro-active leadership structure in which senior Co-directors mentor more junior Deputy Directors as a way to build up research administration responsibilities: for example, the Deputy Directors are given specific responsibilities and tasks, on which they work together with one of the Co-Directors.

The UoA's more than 80% growth in research income since REF 2014 has been made possible by the research support provided to staff. This has been underpinned by a remodelling of the University's research support infrastructure during the assessment period:

- 1) A central Research and Knowledge Exchange (RKE) team was established by the University, to offer research staff more comprehensive and targeted guidance and support on funding opportunities and applications (ILES-4.4 and 4.5). The RKE runs monthly drop-in sessions in the School, organises an annual University wide Grant Writing Programme

for ECRs and mid-career researchers, and offers bespoke individual support. Dedicated RKE staff include two Strategic Funding Managers (one for SSH, the second with expertise in international and EU funding) and a Grants and Contracts Officer. They advise on all aspects of research funding: developing research ideas and finding collaborators, selecting appropriate funding streams, navigating the specific requirements of different funders, costing the bid, and navigating the electronic submission systems.

- 2) A more effective system of grant application support within the School has also been created. We have instituted a new pre-submission peer review process with the aim of improving the quality of funding proposals submitted; all applications require detailed comments from at least two colleagues, as well as the Departmental Research Directors, ahead of final approval by the School's ADR.
- 3) UoA staff have been making effective use of the opportunities stemming from a new University level impact fund (Section 1), which provides financial support for colleagues who are developing promising impactful projects (Glencross, Obradovic-Wochnik). Related to this, the UoA has embraced the opportunities of the impact agenda in a number of ways, by including discussions of impact strategies at annual Strategy Days and by showcasing best practice.
- 4) The UoA has also facilitated the appointment of Research Assistants, as well as Teaching Fellows, in support of staff preparing applications for external funding.

All staff and PGR students in the UoA are located on a single corridor, allowing for frequent interactions between colleagues, which further stimulates collaboration. Staff and PGR students continue to benefit from the significant research-oriented resources held in the University Library, which contains over 250,000 books, 800 current printed periodicals and has over 700 reader places. It provides online access to more than 40 electronic databases and more than 3,400 e-journals.

The suite of changes outlined above has resulted in a research culture shift within the UoA. We have fostered collaboration around shared interests that have brought together different methodological, theoretical and disciplinary approaches as well as linking together ECRs with more senior colleagues:

- Joint papers written by combinations of colleagues, such as a 2019 article by Szent-Ivanyi and Rozbicka published in *Development Policy Review*; a 2020 article on territorial politics in Italy and Spain by Gray and Vampa; or a 2020 article published by Atkins and Gaffney in *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*;
- Joint research projects, notably the #IR_Aesthetics programme developed by three colleagues within the UoA (Beattie, Obradovic-Wochnik and Rozbicka), focusing on the experience of migration and the refugee crisis in South Eastern Europe;
- A Political Studies Association workshop on the state of democracy in Southern Europe, led by four colleagues (Gürsoy, Vampa, Gray, Correa Vila) with regional expertise;
- Joint grant applications (e.g. Turner and Vampa on the future of social democracy; Akhtar and Jenichen on Gender, Ethnicity and Class in British and German Politics; Gray and Rowe on sub-state governments' impact on international relations).

Further details on collaborative activities are provided in Section 4.

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

Research collaborations, academic networks and partnerships

Our overall research profile embraces a much richer range of collaboration compared with 2014, drawing on our broader research capacity. The UoA and the wider School have aimed to develop a stronger international research network based on partnerships with European and international institutions. This is most clearly evidenced by the international nature of each impact case study. Their underpinning research involves collaboration with scholars from outside UK academia, including academics abroad and non-academic research users.

The collaborative strengths of the UoA are further evident in the maintenance (and strengthening) of long-standing formal academic partnerships, including double degree MA programmes with the University of Bamberg, Germany (Governance and International Politics) and Sciences Po, Lille, France (Europe and the World), as well as a joint MA degree programme with Sciences Po, Rennes, France (Multilevel Governance and International Relations). These linkages have fostered strong research relationships in the form of visiting positions at Lille (Southgate and Copsey) and Rennes (Grzelczyk and Gaffney).

The School's Associate Dean International (ADI) has provided an enhanced supporting environment for the extension of our international partnerships. A member of the UoA (Rozbicka, as ADI between 2018 and 2020) led School actions towards the development of full-fledged research collaboration with the Universities of Örebro (Sweden) and Auckland (New Zealand). These institutional collaborations are producing practical research links. For example, Rozbicka's research on music and pop activism includes a team based at the University of Auckland, the Metropolitan University of Prague (Czech Republic), as well as colleagues from four UK universities. Furthermore, the #IR_Aesthetics research programme (Beattie, Obradovic-Wochnik, Rozbicka) has featured collaboration and an exhibition of testimonies and evidence at both Örebro and Auckland (as well as the University of Milan and Tate Liverpool).

Further examples of international research collaboration in the UoA include:

- Glencross is CI on the Erasmus+ project AwarEU, involving partners from universities in Italy, Portugal, Spain, France and the UK;
- Szent-Ivanyi led a collaborative project funded by the International Visegrad Fund, involving six scholars from five countries (UK, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia);
- Turner organised two interdisciplinary conferences with Comenius University of Bratislava (Slovakia), with a peer-reviewed publication resulting from this collaboration.

Over the course of this assessment period, staff from the UoA held visiting positions at: the Transatlantic Academy of the German Marshall Fund of the United States (Leustean, 2014); University of Helsinki (Obradovic Wochnik, 2015); the University of Bologna (Szent-Ivanyi, 2015); the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium (Szent-Ivanyi, 2015); the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences, Amsterdam (Leustean, 2018); the Institute for Trade and Cooperation at Ewha Women's University, Seoul, South Korea (Grzelczyk, 2017); Kluge Fellowship at the American Library of Congress (Hammond, 2019-20); University of Seoul, South Korea (Akhtar, 2018). Some members of staff hold longer term honorary or adjunct appointments at the following institutions: the Foreign Policy Research Institute, USA (Glencross), or the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia (Rozbicka). Colleagues have also connected with wider research communities through numerous invited lectures as well.

The UoA has also welcomed the following Visiting Fellows: Heinz, University of Hannover, Germany, 2015; Benczes, Corvinus University Budapest, Hungary, 2015; Udvari, University of Szeged, Hungary, 2017; Saalfeld, University of Bamberg, Germany, 2017; Misik and Bilcik, Comenius University, Bratislava, Slovakia 2018; and Brusenbauch Meislova, Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic, 2019.

Relationships with key research users and beneficiaries

Impactful research is one of the four elements of the UoA's Research Strategy (ILES-2.3). A key element of achieving impact is ensuring that research is informed by engagement with the wider beneficiary community. The UoA's sustained engagement with the FCO/FCDO is a lynchpin of this, focusing on the UK's bilateral relations with Europe after Brexit. Copsey has been on secondment at the FCO between 2015 and 2020, and has then taken up a permanent position there. He served as the Head of the Europe Research Group (2015-2018) and since 2018 the Head of the Future of Europe Department. In these roles, he engaged extensively with officials across Whitehall and the UK's embassies over how the functioning of the EU affects the Brexit process. Copsey has also helped to shape the UK government's institutional capacity to respond

to developments in EU policy by spearheading the creation of a new Future of Europe Department and organizing a programme of Europe masterclasses, to which several colleagues from the UoA have contributed (Turner, Szent-Ivanyi, Green and Glencross). Copsey was also instrumental in the creation of a new AHRC-ESRC funded Knowledge Exchange Fellowship scheme, which has brought a number of academics from UK Universities across into the FCO on secondment, facilitating broader engagement with their research expertise. In 2018, Turner won one of these competitive AHRC-ESRC-FCO Fellowships, allowing further opportunities to channel research from the UoA into government policy making. He jointly organized a series of seminars on the Brexit negotiations in the UK's Budapest and Berlin embassies and in the UK's Representation to the EU in Brussels for UK diplomats from around the EU. In 2020, Szent-Ivanyi won a second competitive AHRC-ESRC-FCO Fellowship, due to begin in early 2021.

Other researchers within the UoA have also developed strong links within the policy-making community, at various levels of government. Gaffney briefed the FCO and the Cabinet Office on six occasions over the assessment period. Akhtar has provided written evidence to the Government commissioned report into Integration in the United Kingdom, delivered by Dame Louise Casey. She also gave evidence to the Muslims in public life inquiry, chaired by MP Dominic Grieve. Gray provided a briefing on Spanish politics to the FCO Senior Counsellor for UK-Spain Bilateral Relations. Turner, Gaffney, Copsey and Rowe briefed the Shadow Minister for Europe on two occasions. Obradovic-Wochnik, Beattie and Rozbicka provided written evidence to the UK Parliament Foreign Affairs Committee on Finding Responses to Irregular Migration and to the Select Committee on International Development. Rowe provided written research for a Scottish Parliament Finance and Constitutional Affairs Committee Inquiry into the use of Common Frameworks after Brexit. Szent-Ivanyi briefed the incoming ambassador to Budapest. Glencross briefed the Cabinet Office on the Global Britain Policy. Colleagues also developed relationships with policy makers abroad. Rowe has spoken at meetings of the EU Committee of the Regions three times, and Leustean has delivered insights from his research to the EU External Action Service, NATO's Public Diplomacy Division, and the US State Department.

In line with the University's stated strategic aim to deliver enhanced research partnerships with the international and local beneficiary communities (ILES-2.6), the UoA has continued to strengthen its partnerships with both national and international think tanks during the REF period.

- Turner established a new partnership between ACE and the Social Science Research Centre (WZB) in Berlin, employing an economist based there to work on a joint project along with the London-based think tank IPPR. ACE's ESRC-funded seminar on Germany and Brexit was delivered in partnership with the German government-funded think tank, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP).
- Vampa and Turner organised a seminar in Berlin on the Contemporary Challenges of German Social Democracy, which was attended by researchers from German think tanks and ministries.
- Southgate and Glencross have both published in European View, the in-house journal of the Martens Centre, the think tank of the European People's Party. Turner has organised a number of joint events with the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in London involving British and German parliamentarians.
- Jenichen worked alongside seven German and American participants on a transatlantic "German-American Dialogue of the Next Generation" project coordinated by the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies (AIGCS); the project's report was presented to representatives from German political parties, think tanks and civil society organisations in Berlin in 2019.
- In 2015, Gaffney gave a talk on leadership at the Royal Air Force Medical Staff Annual Meeting, Piccadilly, London. In 2015, 2016, and 2017 Gaffney gave talks on France at the Royal College of Defence Studies to senior military officers and government officials from 50 countries.
- Glencross was a member of the Brexit Policy Panel for the UK in a Changing Europe research initiative, a monthly survey of academic experts assessing the Brexit process.

- Szent-Ivanyi delivered perspectives on transition experiences in Central and Eastern Europe and Africa during a Chatham House and Robert Bosch Foundation roundtable meeting in Berlin, 2017.
- Wunderlich presented a session on “Regionalism – the New Globalism”, at the Joint Service Command and Staff College, Shrivenham, 2019.
- Gürsoy produced a specially-commissioned report on UK-Turkish trade after Brexit to the Foreign Economic Relations Board of Turkey (2020).
- Akhtar contributed to and chaired a session on Muslim Women Politicians at the Bradford Literature Festival (2016).

Within the regional community, colleagues from the UoA are embedded in a significant number of non-academic networks.

- Miao is engaged in research collaboration with the Birmingham Friends of the Earth group on an interdisciplinary research project on air inequality in the city.
- Fitzpatrick is co-founder of the “Football Collective”, a network established in 2015 to connect academics and practitioners engaged in critical analysis of the game. Fitzpatrick is also engaged locally with the West Midlands Young Combined Authority on an outreach and public engagement project.
- Rozbicka’s research within the Birmingham Live Music Project engages with various stakeholders in the West Midlands (e.g. Birmingham City Council, Musicians Union and diverse venues, festival organizers etc).
- The UoA’s engagement with the University’s beneficiaries in the West Midlands has further included a series of events on Making the EU Referendum Relevant to Young People in Birmingham, 2015-2016 (Rowe), talks for local businesses on preparations for Brexit, 2017 (Glencross), and talks on Pakistani heritage in Birmingham in 2016 (Akhtar). Works by Gray and Szent-Ivanyi have been cited in Birmingham City Council’s report entitled “The Impact of Brexit on Birmingham and the West Midlands”.

Contributions to the research base, economy and society

Members of UoA make an outstanding contribution to the research base of area studies, through serving in various editorial roles, leadership positions in scholarly bodies, and acting as peer reviewers for funders, publishers, and journals, as well as the media. Their work has also been acknowledged by a number of prizes.

Editorial roles. Members of the UoA are well represented among the editorial offices and boards of leading international journals and book series. Copsey co-edited the Journal of Common Market Studies Annual Review (2008-2017); Turner is Reviews Editor for *German Politics* and Gray is Reviews Editor for the *International Journal of Iberian Studies*; Gürsoy is Assistant Editor of the *Turkish Journal of International Relations*. Szent-Ivanyi is an Editor of *Society and Economy in Central and Eastern Europe*. Glencross is an Associate Editor at the ECPR Press (Rowman and Littlefield); Leustean is Founding Editor of the Routledge Book Series on *Religion, Society and Government in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet States*. Akhtar served on the Associate Board for *Sociology* (2016-2018).

Roles in scholarly bodies. Colleagues have held leading roles within international disciplinary associations over the duration of the REF period:

- Atkins: Secretary, Rhetoric, Discourse and Politics Specialist Group, Political Studies Association (PSA).
- Beattie: Co-founder and Convenor, Emotions and International Relations Working Group, British International Studies Association (BISA).
- Farrand-Carrapico: Co-Convenor of the European Security Working Group, BISA
- Fitzpatrick: Co-Convenor, Sport and Politics Specialist Group, PSA.
- Glencross: Committee Member, University Association of Contemporary European Studies (UACES).
- Gray: Co-founder and Convenor, Spanish Politics Specialist Group, PSA

- Gürsoy: Co-Convenor, Turkish Politics Specialist Group, PSA; Vice-President, Research Committee, International Political Science Association (IPSA).
- Leustean: Co-Chair, Group on Orthodoxy, Politics and International Relations, International Orthodox Theological Association.
- Obradovic-Wochnik: Co-Convenor, South East Europe Working Group, BISA.
- Szent-Ivanyi: Executive Committee Member, Central and Eastern European International Studies Association.
- Turner: Co-Secretary and Acting Chair, International Association for the Study of German Politics.
- Vampa: Convenor, Italian Politics Specialist Group, PSA.

Peer review. UoA staff also actively contribute peer review to a number of funders and journals.

- Glencross: member of the Peer Review College for the UK Research and Innovation Future Leaders Fellowship scheme and has reviewed for the ESRC, Swiss National Science Foundation and the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions.
- Leustean: reviewer for the ESRC's Global Challenges Research Fund, and the European Research Council's Starting Grant Programme.
- Szent-Ivanyi: reviewer for the ESRC, the Research Foundation of Flanders, the Hungarian Scientific Research Fund, the Czech Science Fund and the National Science Centre of Poland.

Colleagues continue to contribute regularly to disciplinary research conversations through their work as reviewers for an extremely wide range of area studies, politics and international relations journals.

Media. Colleagues have made numerous contributions to print, online and broadcast media, including well-regarded outlets such as BBC TV News, and France 24 (English), France 24 TV (French), France 3 TV, Sky News, CNBC News, Arte Television, BBC Radio 4, BBC Radio 5 Live, BBC World Service, Radio France Internationale, The Guardian, The Independent, The Economist, Aftenpost, To Vima, THES, La Tercera, New Statesman, Huffington Post. During the assessment period, UoA members have written a total of 58 articles for The Conversation, which have together achieved more than 500,000 reads. Gaffney (for the 2017 French Presidential Elections) and Gray (for coverage of unrest in Catalonia) became the go-to commentators in the British media.

Prizes. Colleagues in the UoA have been recognised within the discipline for their outstanding research contributions. Leustean's edited volume on *Orthodox Christianity and Nationalism in Nineteenth Century Southeastern Europe* was awarded a CHOICE 2015 'Outstanding Academic Title' by the American Library Association. Atkins was awarded the 2015 James B. Christoph Prize by the British Politics Group of APSA for the best conference paper on British politics, presented by a junior faculty member. Gürsoy was awarded the 2016 Young Scientists Award by the Turkish Science Academy.