

Institution: Aston University

Unit of assessment: 17 Business and Management Studies

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

1.1 The focus of **Aston Business School (ABS)** is to conduct research of excellent quality that adds value for our beneficiaries i.e. students; business and the professions; the region and society. Creating value for end users, whether local or global, is a goal that unites everyone at Aston University; it is integral to our strategies at all levels (Institutional Level Environment Statement [ILES] 1.1). The ABS Research Strategy underpins the delivery of our high quality research and it emphasises the importance of delivering impactful solutions that address beneficiary challenges. Our desire to achieve positive impact through applied research guides our recruitment decisions, provides direction for the management and development of staff, and motivates colleagues to strive for continuous improvement. ABS aligns directly with UoA17.

1.2 Over the last seven years, we have increased vitality in our research environment, supported staff to increase grant capture, enhanced doctoral students' development and grown in our increasingly positive international reputation. For instance, we have:

- Increased the value of research grants awarded by **82%**, and research income by **90%**, compared to the previous REF period;
- Brought in nearly **£3m** worth of grants from RCUK in 2018-19 and 2019-20 (those two years totaling over **80%** of the RCUK funding we achieved during the REF2014 period);
- Created three new Research Centres during this REF period: Aston Centre for Growth, Centre for Research into Ethnic Minority Entrepreneurship and Lloyds Banking Group Centre for Business Prosperity;
- Moved to **13th** among UK business schools, based on HESA research income data (CABS 2020 Report: Research Income for Business and Management);
- Submitted **135%** more staff to REF2021 (109.05 FTE) than we submitted to REF2014 (46.3 FTE);
- Increased doctoral degrees awarded by **63%** (compared to REF2014 period).

1.3 The excellent reputation that ABS has forged is particularly important for our UoA17 submission. For instance, ABS is part of an elite group of business schools across the world that hold '**triple-crown accreditation** from [AACSB \(Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business\)](#), [AMBA \(Association of MBAs\)](#) and [EQUIS \(European Quality Improvement System\)](#). The Economist ranks our MBA in the top 100 (85th in the world; 12th in the UK). These accreditations help drive staff and student recruitment and the quality focussed principles in each accreditation help energise staff commitment towards continuous improvement. Additionally, our sustained commitment towards the impact of our research is one of the reasons ABS received the Small Business Charter (one of the first UK business schools to receive that recognition). It is a positive reflection of our ongoing work to support small businesses, the local economy and student entrepreneurship.

1.4 In 2019, QS awarded ABS with a five star rating for excellence in teaching, employability, innovation, facilities, inclusiveness and internationalisation. ABS also features in the **QS World Top 100** for Business and Management Studies. These accolades are borne out of success within UoA17, underpinned by the Aston research environment. We have recently won The Guardian

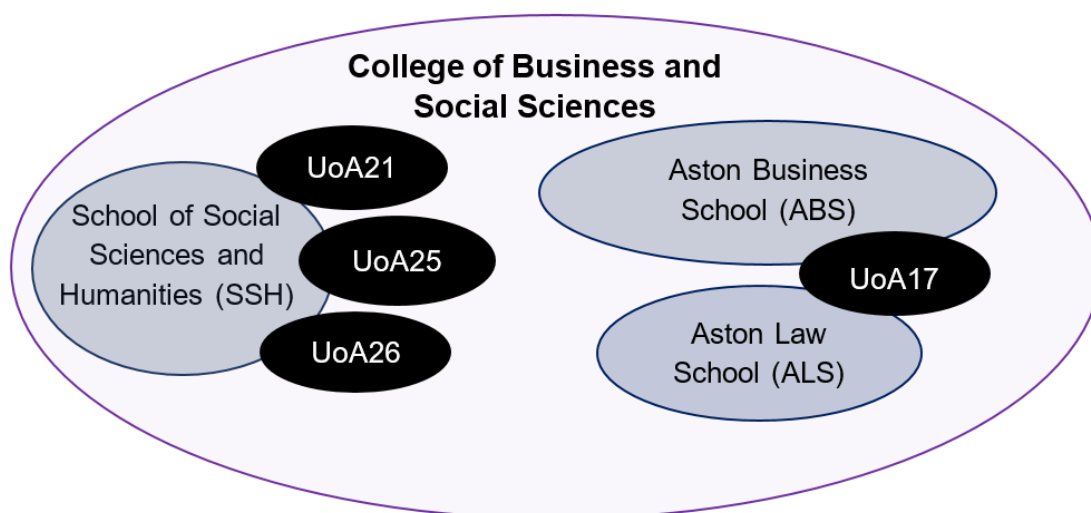
'2020 University of the Year', the Times Higher Education '2020 Outstanding Entrepreneurial University' (ILES 2.4) and are acknowledged as sector leaders for Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTPs) in the **KTP 2020 Best of the Best Awards** (ILES 2.6). Across the University, we take the achievement of excellence seriously, no more so than in ABS and we are proud of our contribution towards the achievement of these accolades. Our environment, and the recognition we receive for it, helps us attract, retain and motivate staff and allows us to share best practice, work collegiately and deliver our research strategy.

1.5 As we look forward, our five focus points are to develop the following:

- A broad publication portfolio known for rigour and real world applicability;
- Innovative projects that attract external funding;
- Impactful insights that add value to our beneficiaries (ILES 1.1);
- Highly knowledgeable, skilled and employable doctoral students;
- Research informed teaching demonstrating practical application.

1.6 Within UoA17, we will achieve the objectives above by implementing our Research and Impact Strategies, making effective interventions and tracking our progress using research metrics responsibly. During this REF period, Aston Law School was a constituent part of Aston Business School. As part of the University's restructure in August 2020, and the introduction of three Colleges (ILES 2.1), Aston Law School is a separate part of the College of Business and Social Sciences in its own right (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. UoA17 within the wider University structure (from August 2020)



1.7 Since REF2014, our aspirations (i.e. recruit more researchers; prioritise activities to maintain research focus; deliver excellent research; achieve impact through further business engagement; increase international collaboration) have aligned to each iteration of the University's Research Strategy (ILES 2.3). The four threads of the Strategy set out the priorities for our research: (1) impactful, (2) collaborative, (3) financially sustainable and (4) excellent. Each of these component parts is both a measure of our past success and provides direction for the future:

1.7.1 Impactful Research

1.7.1a Alongside our ABS Research Strategy, we implemented an Impact Strategy during this REF period that provides additional clarity and focus to deliver our overarching goal of 'excellent research with impact'. Our priorities are to:

- Integrate impact into research project design;
- Develop skills to achieve impact through collaboration and dissemination;
- Further nurture a culture of beneficiary engagement.

1.7.1b Within ABS we have worked alongside the University Impact Manager (ILES 4.12), using new systems to identify, invest in, nurture and record our impact. Over the last three years, ABS has allocated **£20k** per annum into an impact acceleration fund. In addition, we have also received funding from the University's annual Impact Fund worth **£150k** (ILES 4.13). This funding has allowed us to support ABS academics in the development of impact, for example:

- Using external consultants to measure impact and business engagement activities. Independent validation allowed for objective identification, measurement and reporting of impact related activity (**Baines, Dey, Theodorakopoulos, Butler, Hart**);
- Funding travel to support our research, for example, 'Business led peace in Somalia' working alongside the United Nations (**Kazmi**);
- Funding external experts to train staff members on developing impact and communicating it to the public (for example, **Thanassoulis, Giraleas, Clegg, Bigdeli, Ram, Bouguerra; Sadeghi; Kozlovskaya, Azevedo, Nair, and Cooper**). For instance, during the current REF period, we have published **63** articles in *The Conversation*, with a combined **576k** 'reads';
- Enlisting Research Assistants for short-term project work to further the impact of research projects e.g. testing and analysing a digital toolset that measures an organisation's change readiness (**Butler**);
- Supporting events and conferences that communicated our research, and its impact, to the public, such as the *Annual Ethnic Minority Business Conference* (**Ram**) and the *Annual State of Small Business Britain Conference* (**Hart**).

1.7.1c To deliver the ABS Impact Strategy, we appointed three professorial level "Impact Champions" within ABS. This team (**Hart, Albores** and **De Loo**), alongside the Associate Dean Research (ADR, **O'Regan**) and University Impact Manager (**Atwood**), lead on all aspects of impact including sharing best practice (through workshops or other events), mentoring colleagues and advising on the integration of impact into funding bids.

1.7.2 Collaborative Research:

1.7.2a Within ABS, a key driver for achieving research excellence is collaboration; it also forms a key part of the University's Research Strategy (ILES 2.7). Our focus on collaboration, in conjunction with our growing international reputation, has driven growth in all ABS publications authored through international collaboration, from **39.0%** in 2014 to **50.6%** in 2019 (Scival: December 2020). Collaborative working allows us to foster a culture of teamwork within the College and encourages staff to build their external research networks. Development of a wide-ranging collaborative mindset can lead to research that is more impactful and enhances the outcomes for our beneficiaries (ILES 2.7). Over **83%**

of publications within the UoA17 submission demonstrate collaboration at international or national level (only **17%** show either institutional collaboration or single authorship – Scival: December 2020). Our submission shows collaboration with academics from across 37 different countries aided by the high numbers of staff members who were born outside the UK (see 2.4).

1.7.2b Examples of ABS collaborations include the Enterprise Research Centre (combining expertise from ABS, University of Warwick and Queen's University Belfast) and the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM), a worldwide project where the UK team includes academics from ABS (**Hart, Mickiewicz**), Universiteit Utrecht, National University of Ireland Galway, Queens University Belfast and University of Strathclyde. Another example is the PROPEL Hub, an ESRC funded project focusing on productivity outcomes of workplace practice, engagement and learning. Led by the University of Strathclyde, the project includes ABS (**RAM**), University of East Anglia, Ulster University, University of Nottingham, Cardiff University, University of Sheffield and the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

1.7.2c Collaboration is encouraged through meetings and seminars operated within the College's Departments. Additionally, staff receive financial support and encouragement to attend conferences, as a means to enhance dissemination, collaboration and reputation (see 2.11.6), and we benefit from the University sponsored International Collaboration Fund (ILES 2.9). The events and workshops run by our Research and Knowledge Exchange Department (RKE) also help to bring together Teaching and Research (T&R) staff from across the University (ILES 4.13). This provides an opportunity to network, learn new skills and understand how one individual's research can connect with that of others. The annual Interdisciplinary Conference, run by the Graduate School (ILES 2.10), offers Early Career Researchers (ECRs) and postgraduate research students the chance to create connections and understand the importance of collaboration. Additionally, collaboration outside of the institution means ABS can be more effective at attracting research talent as we demonstrate our research capabilities and critical mass, internal support mechanisms and impact focused research to others around the globe.

1.7.3 Financially Sustainable Research:

1.7.3a A key component of both the University and ABS research strategy is financial sustainability (ILES 2.8). To ensure sufficient resources are available to carry out excellent, collaborative and impactful research we focus on increasing external grant success, from funders that deliver a high contribution level (including UKRI, UK Government and industry). Our research income hit an all-time high in 2019-20 (**£3.44m**) with our rolling three-year average increasing year on year across the REF period.

1.7.3b We work with professional services departments across the University to ensure the sustainability of ABS research. Colleagues from RKE (including the Strategic Funding Manager, International Funding Manager, Grants and Contracts Officer and the Business Development Manager) and Finance (Head of Research Finance and ABS Finance Business Partner) work closely with senior ABS Staff. Together, the team is responsible for horizon scanning and understanding changes in the funding landscape. There is a regular review of the ABS funder mix, our matched funding commitments (ILES 2.8) and the impact of our funding portfolio on our beneficiaries. These meetings have resulted in a

strategic focus on increasing RCUK grant applications and, over the last few years, a slightly more cautious approach to European focused initiatives (see section 3.2).

1.7.3c The Strategic Funding Manager (ILES 4.5) works alongside individuals, Departments and Research Centres to plan grant capture strategy and refine grant applications. The ADR (**O'Regan**), Departmental Research Convenors (**Crawshaw; Cooper, Neokleous; Farrell; Salijeni; Beltagui; Chaudhry**) and Senior Research Manager (**Jones**) decide the most effective ways to allocate the ABS research support budget while RKE run a series of events and workshops and the University Grant Writing Programme (ILES 4.5). Based on the University's Peer Review Policy, we implement pre-submission peer review of funding applications at College level (ILES 2.8). The objective is to improve the quality of grant applications and to improve success rates.

1.7.4 Excellent Research:

1.7.4a ABS delivers excellent research through a combination of our Departmental disciplines and our outcomes-based Research Centres (see section 3). In line with the University's recruitment practices (ILES 3.2), we focus on achieving a diverse, multi-cultural workforce that allows our reputation and international collaboration to flourish. We provide T&R colleagues with the time and support to target competitive funding schemes, attend conferences, have regular study leave, publish research of the highest quality, support PGR students through effective supervision and deliver high levels of impact.

1.7.4b A recent example of work that combines research excellence, impact and effective collaboration is through Lloyds Banking Group Centre for Business Prosperity. The report 'Defying Gravity? Policy Uncertainty and Trade Diversion' (**Du**) investigates the effects of Brexit on UK Trade. Lloyds Banking Group used the findings of the report to design their campaign 'A New World For Global British Business'. The report provides insights into how British businesses have increased trade diversion away from the EU, what it means for UK firms trading internationally and what lessons can be learnt. The research received significant media coverage: [Guardian](#), [Yahoo Finance](#) and [UKICE Blog](#).

1.7.4c ABS has its own Ethics Committee that reviews all research projects involving human participants. The ABS Ethics Committee works closely with the University Research Ethics Committee and the Aston University Research Integrity Office to ensure that we comply with the Concordat to Support Research Integrity (ILES 2.12). The University is a signatory to DORA and we consistently encourage academics and professional staff to review the way we evaluate research and implement best practice (ILES 2.13). Similarly, we have shifted thinking within ABS so that it aligns with the Open Science agenda (ILES 2.14, ILES 2.15), encourages the use of PURE (our current research information system) and emphasises the importance of ORCIDs (ILES 2.17).

1.8 For this REF return, Aston committed to a 100% submission of eligible staff. Section D of the University's [Code of Practice](#) sets out the process for selecting outputs (with the peer review process detailed in Appendix 6). In UoA17, three workshops were run for staff to explain these processes, and those involved with selecting outputs participated in a comprehensive EDI training session (developed in conjunction with colleagues at Advance HE). Our selection of outputs took gender, ethnicity and career stage into account. As part of our REF preparations, colleagues in RKE and HR conducted an Equality Impact Assessment (January 2021) comparing outputs

attributed to all Category A staff (using FTE, not headcount) with those outputs attributed to those with protected characteristics (gender, age, disability and ethnicity). In UoA17, the analysis of variance highlighted no statistically significant differences, based on a protected characteristic.

1.9 The Individual Circumstances process (Code of Practice: Appendix 7 and 8) was run centrally in RKE. All Category A staff received an invitation to submit a declaration of individual circumstances, and those who made a declaration received an invite to contact our HR Business Partner to discuss their circumstances, and any support that we may be able to provide.

Section 2. People

2.1 Our UoA17 submission has **117** Cat A staff members with a headcount of **109.05** (114 T&R staff and 3 Independent Researchers). Table 1 shows our UoA17 submission by career level, age and gender.

Table 1: UoA17 Staff by career level, age and gender (117 headcount; 109.05 FTE)

Role	30-39	40-49	50-59	60+	Total
Fellow	0	1	0	0	1
Female	0	0	0	0	0
Male	0	1	0	0	1
Lecturer	36	12	5	0	53
Female	14	2	1	0	17
Male	22	10	4	0	36
Senior Lecturer	7	16	8	4	35
Female	1	3	3	1	8
Male	6	13	5	3	27
Reader	0	1	1	1	3
Female	0	1	0	1	2
Male	0	0	1	0	1
Professor	0	5	9	11	25
Female	0	2	1	1	4
Male	0	3	8	10	21
Total	43	35	23	16	117

2.2 The staff and Senior Management Team have worked hard to develop the research culture within ABS. It provides T&R staff with clear expectations regarding research (publications, research visibility, external funding, growth of research income and developing the PGR student cohort) and mirrors the University's research strategy (ILES 2.3). There is also a wider expectation placed on staff that our research environment remains focussed on the goal of fairness, equity and inclusivity. We have led from the top and ensured a balanced representation of gender within the Senior Management Team. This includes the appointment of women to research related senior

roles during the REF period, including Deputy Dean (**Elliott**); Associate Dean for Research (**Decker**); Associate Dean for Accreditations (**Clarke**); Heads of Department (**Tabrizi, Hutchinson, Gee**) and the Research Centre Director of the Lloyds Banking Group Centre for Business Prosperity (**Du**). The ABS Advisory Board has also rebalanced its membership, improving female and BAME representation. For instance, female representation increased from **21%** (2016/17) to **46%** (2019/20).

2.3 Across the REF period, a dedicated HR professional has worked within ABS to ensure the effective communication and implementation of people related policies, processes and practices. For instance, when recruiting new staff, we construct panels that reflect the diversity inherent in our staff structure and all staff involved in recruitment undergo training to ensure they recruit fairly, without discrimination and avoiding bias. All shortlists are scrutinised for fair representation across all characteristics and all candidates for Teaching and Research posts make presentations to Departments (as well as hiring panels) to ensure a robust recruitment process. The University will consider an anonymous shortlisting process for all academic appointments in 2021 (ILES 3.2). ABS promotion panels have the same levels of rigour and integrity and are gender balanced. All staff members receive training on 'Equality and Diversity Awareness' and we encourage staff to undertake other training, such as 'An Introduction to Unconscious Bias', that helps develop the ABS culture (and is mandatory for all Senior Management Team members and those on appointment panels).

2.4 Across the University (ILES 1.2), and within ABS, there is a focus on increasing the number of staff from minority groups. It is one of the reasons Aston received *The Guardian* 'University of the Year' accolade. The University's recent academic recruitment demonstrates our commitment to improving diversity (ILES 3.2), and Aston has signed up to the Race Equality Charter. Within ABS, we have seen an increase in our BAME T&R staff from **19%** in 2018 to **33%** in 2020. Additionally, the percentage of T&R staff born outside of the UK has risen from **47%** (2015) to **55%** (2020). The make-up of our staff population increasingly reflects the variety of backgrounds, nationalities and cultural heritage evident in our student population. It demonstrates a commitment towards increasing diversity, and equality, recognising it as an ABS core strength. The expertise of two of our staff members (**Ram, Chaudhry**) has resulted in both serving on the BAME Business and Enterprise All Party Parliamentary Group. **Ram** is also a Co-Chair for the Diversity and Inclusion Business Council for the British Bankers' Association and a member of the Equalities Advisory Group for the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy. **Budhwar** is a member on the Scientific Committee for the Academic Journal Guide Management Committee (which includes oversight of General Management, Gender and Diversity, Social Responsibility and Ethics).

2.5 The University's commitment to enhancing the Aston culture and widening participation is set out in our Diversity and Inclusion Strategy (ILES 3.4) and our Equality and Diversity Policies and Procedures (ILES 3.5). The University Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Forum, and its eight sub-groups, have representatives from across ABS. The ABS 'Equality, Diversity and Wellbeing Group' (EDW Group) feeds into the EDI Forum and it is an important source of information for ABS senior management. The Group informs their decision-making processes, provides guidance on how to shape the culture within ABS and engages staff members in a range of initiatives and activities. T&R staff form an intrinsic part of the Group (including **Kazmi, Wynter, Ackfeldt, Colaco, Ram, Meliou, Rodriguez-Espindola** and **Fletcher**) and are Departmental level advocates for the changes needed to continue making our environment more inclusive, diverse

and equality focussed. We have a number of colleagues, outside of this group, whose areas of research include gender, equality and diversity (including **Budhwar, Hart, Mickiewicz, Jones, Sacramento, Theodorakopoulos** and **Butler**) and we leverage that expertise wherever possible.

2.6 The ABS EDW Group plays a key role within ABS to tackle gender inequality. They are currently working alongside the Senior Management Team on an Athena SWAN Bronze Award submission, with the objective of achieving an Athena SWAN Silver award by 2025; the University currently holds the Silver award (ILES 3.6). Working groups of ABS staff and students have analysed data and reviewed the implementation of University policies, processes and procedures that relate to equality and diversity. Parental leave, opportunities for flexible working, re-induction processes and other support mechanisms (ILES 3.7) are all working effectively. For example, our 'Keeping in Touch' (KIT) process has allowed those on maternity leave to remain connected to the intellectual life of the UoA and flexible working has allowed parents to find the best ways to balance family life with work-based responsibilities. We have 6 members of T&R staff who have formally changed their working hours over the last 3 years, and we have many more staff who have worked with their managers to agree the most suitable working patterns without going through formal processes. Monthly meetings between the Deputy Dean and Heads of Department have ensured consistency across Departments with respect to leave arrangements, flexible working requests and the implementation of other policies and practices.

2.7 There is recognition that managing caring responsibilities alongside career objectives is difficult and that flexibility is essential. For instance, School level meetings are organised between 10am and 3pm (outside of the usual hotspots for childcare activity) and colleagues generally work from home for designated research days. During the pandemic, we have built on that flexibility through increasing communication, empowering staff and improving efficiency. Our staff have been able to work at times that suit them, their families and their individual circumstances. Colleagues at all levels are open to feedback on working arrangements and are happy to re-arrange meetings around the home-based responsibilities of those involved and it bodes well for the work-life balance of our staff and their engagement post-pandemic. The latest staff survey (Winter 2020) shows that during the pandemic:

- **85.6%** of ABS staff agree that their manager/supervisor has supported their efforts to adapt to changes in working arrangements (**43.4%** agree; **42.2%** strongly agree);
- **77.5%** of ABS staff agree that their work schedule is flexible enough to enable them to meet family and personal responsibilities (**45.1%** agree; **32.4%** strongly agree);
- **86.7%** of ABS staff agree that they have meetings with their manager (virtually) at a frequency that meets their needs (**39.9%** agree; **46.8%** strongly agree).

Staff Development

2.8 The development opportunities for staff within UoA17 have increased over the assessment period. Firstly, due to an increase in the total number of students (undergraduate and postgraduate) studying business and management, from **2,560** in 2014/15 to **4,060** in 2018/19 (HeidiPlus: December 2020) we have increased our Teaching Fellow staff numbers, from **36** to **105** over the last 5 years. This has allowed T&R staff to increase focus on research related activities and has enhanced our research capability and teaching agendas simultaneously. Secondly, there has been an increase in development opportunities for staff. This includes a wide range of courses, workshops and mentoring opportunities that support the career development of colleagues, including those run by Organisational Development (ILES 3.10), professional

qualifications certified by Advance HE (ILES 3.10) and mentoring services (ILES 3.9). For instance, the University introduced an 'Aston Women's Leadership Programme' in 2013-14 to help develop the leadership potential of women. So far, 16 women from ABS have benefitted from the initiative and all attendees are encouraging other female colleagues in ABS to enrol. Additionally, RKE run a range of initiatives for staff that support research within ABS (see section 3).

2.9 In 2018-19, the University moved from a traditional annual review process to one entitled 'My Development Conversation' (ILES 3.8), also known as 'MyDC'. This system allows for ongoing dialogue between a member of staff and their manager, rather than the previous biannual meetings. It helps individuals feel more empowered, and allows for greater control over their personal and professional development. For T&R staff, this means they are able to reflect on their aspirations, and to identify and work towards research targets for the academic year (such as planning research and impact projects, developing new collaborations, submitting grant applications and generating outputs for publication). MyDC has led to staff members feeling more connected to managers and that they are well supported.

2.10 Career development and promotional opportunities are a key component of MyDC discussions and an important factor in maintaining a vibrant research culture. Alongside this, the ABS Dean hosts an annual workshop on promotions, career planning and professional progression. Additionally, he meets every member of T&R staff annually to discuss their plans for career development, promotion and engagement with beneficiaries. Individual discussions with the Dean, instigated in 2017, have proved particularly valuable to female staff members (see 2.14).

2.11 Within ABS, staff are supported in the following ways:

2.11.1 Induction: All new staff members engage with the University Induction programme (ILES 3.7). In addition, the ABS induction runs at regular intervals for all new staff and covers practical elements of working within the School e.g. support mechanisms for hosting conferences and events, using the self-service video creation booth *Rapidmooc* and presentations from key contacts. We have built (within the last two years) an online induction resource for T&R staff that complements the content delivered in the ABS induction session.

2.11.2 Reduced teaching load for T&R staff new to teaching: For T&R staff new to teaching, Department Heads embed flexibility into the teaching workload allocation. Each individual has an induction plan and work pattern configured to suit their personal skill set and developmental areas. This enables each individual to find the right balance between developing research excellence and being able to deliver teaching of the highest quality.

2.11.3 New staff start-up fund: All new T&R staff appointed to their first academic appointment in ABS have a 'start-up fund' of up to £5,000 to invest in research related activities. New appointments at Professorial level will usually agree a start-up fund on a case-by-case basis, taking into account the focus of their work, the type of grants they will be applying for, the practicalities of getting research off the ground or their contribution towards a research centre. For example, a recent appointment received £10,000 that resulted in a number of successful bids (e.g. European Commission: Strategic Partnerships for School Education) and interdisciplinary collaborations.

2.11.4 Mentoring: For every new T&R staff member the department organises a mentor. This process helps colleagues settle more effectively and to develop outside of the formal management hierarchy and operational processes. Additionally, the University provides mentoring services for staff through our Organisational Development department (ILES 3.9).

2.11.5 Seminars: Research Convenors (**Cooper, Salijeni, Neokleous, Farrell, Beltagui, Crawshaw** and **Chaudhury**) organise bi-weekly departmental research seminars for academic colleagues and PGR students. The seminars are a useful forum for the presentation of early drafts of research papers/grant proposals and allow for internal peer feedback for developmental purposes.

2.11.6 Conference attendance: All members of T&R staff can benefit from support to attend conferences with the focus being to present papers, deliver professional development workshops and developing research networks. Within UoA17, we budgeted **£0.5m** for conference attendance costs across the current REF period. This investment helped grow our international reputation, generated new working relationships and provided development opportunities for staff members. For example, in 2019 we supported 13 staff members (including **Budhwar, Meliou, Schwarz, Stollberger, Nguyen** and **Fletcher**) to attend the Academy of Management conference in Boston (the most prestigious event in the Business and Management calendar). One of the papers delivered was on 'The role of authenticity at work in understanding the effects of LGBT+ friendly human resource management practices' (**Fletcher**) and another one on 'Diversity and precarious work during socio-economic upheaval' (**Meliou**).

2.12 The ABS staffing strategy has focused on recruiting and developing ECRs. All ECRs complete a Career Development Plan and it is one of the key ways we operationalise the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers (ILES 3.13). The Career Development Plan is a framework that brings together all the help available internally and allows ECRs to plot their own professional development pathway. Within ABS, dedicated support is available to ECRs in the form of away days and workshops focussing on key themes (e.g. publications, research grants and career development opportunities). Our work with ECRs has enabled them to achieve external funding (e.g. **Cash, Narayanan** and **Joel-Edgar**, including an ESRC New Investigator Scheme Award, **Bigdeli**). Our ECRs form a key part of our peer review systems for publications as well as grant applications (ILES 4.5) and are encouraged to join, or work closely with, our ABS Research Centres. At the University level, the ECRs participate in the 'ECR Forum' (ILES 3.14), through which they are able to enhance their ability to work across disciplines, build effective networks and engage in focussed developmental opportunities.

2.13 Regardless of level, all academic staff in ABS may apply for Research (Study) Leave (ILES 3.11). This is a competitive process whereby staff members submit proposals setting out how they will use the time and resources requested. Research leave has led to many successes, for example:

- The delivery of workshops in conjunction with the United Nations (UN) and International NGOs to develop a community of practice, funding proposals and the delivery of an international symposium 'Business and Peace in Somali' funded by the UN and GCRF (**Kazmi**);

- The delivery of workshops for Birmingham Botanical Gardens on topics including environmental strategy awareness; environmental assessment and environmental policy formulation alongside a **£267k** funding proposal to The British Academy Youth Future Programme (**Nunes**);
- Working with Coventry and Warwickshire Local Enterprise Partnership (CWLEP) to deliver development sessions on [Entrepreneurial Team Coaching](#) and commercialising a team-coaching framework (**Napiersky**);
- Providing evidence to the BEIS Select Committee Parliamentary Inquiry on ‘The Future of Audit’ (**Basioudis**).

2.14 Our promotions process is transparent and inclusive, and reinforces the importance of career development (ILES 3.3). The support available helps our staff members effectively demonstrate their knowledge, skills and abilities against our well-defined promotions criteria. We monitor how many people apply across protected characteristics (e.g. gender, ethnicity, age and disability) and look for trends. For instance, over the last two academic years, the percentage of female T&R staff applying for promotion (from the available pool) has exceeded male staff (F: **25%** vs M: **14.5%** 2018/19; F: **20%** vs M: **16.9%** 2019/20). The promotion success rate between 2018/19 and 2019/20 has improved by **10%** (**40%** vs **50%**). Our strategy of encouraging well-qualified female members of staff to apply for promotion would seem to be generating positive results.

PGR Students

2.15 We fully integrate our postgraduate research (PGR) students into the research environment within ABS. Our PhD Programme allows students to develop their research skills and expertise in one of the ABS areas of expertise. During this REF period, we have awarded **128.78** Research Doctoral Degrees (REF4a). ABS is also part of the [Midlands Graduate School](#), a consortium of regional research intensive universities (including Birmingham, Warwick, Nottingham, Leicester, and Loughborough) funded by the Economic and Social Science Research Council (ESRC). This has enabled us to support **8** ESRC-funded studentships during the current REF period. Additionally, we have been able to offer **25** fully funded *PhD Dean’s Scholarships*. Through these, we have been able to recruit talented students to ABS (who excelled at undergraduate or postgraduate level) many of whom would not have been able to support themselves to study at doctoral level. This approach increases the depth of our PGR talent pool and links to the University’s commitment to widening participation (ILES 2.8).

Table 2 Doctoral Awards (disaggregated REF4 data)

Academic Year	Professional Doctorates	PhD	REF4a Total
2013/4	2	15	17
2014/5	1	13.2	14.2
2015/6	0	27	27
2016/7	2	20.33	22.33
2017/8	1	15.5	16.5
2018/9	4	14	18
2019/0	0	13.75	13.75
Grand Total	10	118.78	128.78

2.16 The Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) allows senior executives from around the world to change/enhance their career through doctoral level study. ABS has awarded **10** UK based PGR

students with the DBA since 2013/14. Our DBA programme is one of only **4** AMBA accredited programmes in the UK (and **11** globally) and was ranked 13th globally by the [European Economic Committee](#). The DBA is an important complement to the PhD programme; both cohorts mix, share ideas and grow their research skills and knowledge in ways that would not otherwise be possible. For example, DBA students share with PhD students the ways doctoral level research can influence and impact organisations with a real world context. DBA students benefit from the more theoretically focussed PhD cohort, who often have a greater understanding of research design and methods (due to more recent completion of postgraduate level qualifications). In October 2020, there were **80** PhD and **78** DBA students registered on our programmes.

2.17 Doctoral students have access to our PhD study suite which offers a bank of computers for individual study, a range of rooms for teamwork, a dedicated kitchen area for PhD students and a 'chill out' area. PGR students can access a comprehensive set of facilities and software packages through the library (ILES 4.4) and our IT Services department. ABS students have specific access to the Bloomberg Terminal Lounge (to access Bloomberg Professional, which includes detailed market data, news and analytics), our *RapidMooc* Centre (for professional self-service video creation) and Qualtrics (for survey creation and distribution).

2.18 ABS PGR students participate in the Graduate School Training Programme (ILES 3.17) and complete structured research training. The research training takes place in their first year through completion of four Research Methods Courses, based on guidelines that form part of our ESRC Doctoral Training Partnership (DTP), with modules delivered by staff from across the College of Business and Social Sciences (ILES 2.1). **Crawshaw** is a member of the ESRC DTP Training Board. The interdisciplinary expertise available to ABS PGR students through the College provides them with the maximum range of skills, knowledge and experience to enable them to develop effectively. There is a keen focus across ABS on the need to develop PGR students in a way that allows them to succeed, either in higher education or in industry, business and the professions. The compulsory 'Professional Development and Research Impact' module helps embed research impact at the early stages of a research career pathway and highlights the importance of career management and professional development. PhD Students are also encouraged to complete the Higher Education Academy accredited 'An Introduction to Learning and Teaching in HE' offered by the University, which prepares them for teaching and boosts their future employability (ILES 3.10).

2.19 Each PGR student has a supervisory team made up of a primary supervisor and one or more associate supervisors. We encourage academics at all levels, from Lecturer to Professor, to supervise PGR students. Academics new to research supervision receive full supervisory training and those who are experienced supervisors have to complete mandatory refresher training every three years. The training is organised and monitored by the Graduate School (ILES 3.16).

2.20 PhD students in ABS are encouraged to provide confidential feedback on their supervision experience through an annual reporting process and through the PGR Student Representative (who sits on the ABS Research Committee). We also use feedback from the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) to refine how we deliver the highest levels of support and development for our PGR student cohort. Support and guidance are available through a range of sources including a Postgraduate Tutor, Director of Research Degree Programmes, Senior Research Manager and the Associate Dean Research. All play an active part in managing the success of our doctoral programmes and are the driving force behind the ABS PRES action plan.

Our Departmental Research Convenors are actively encouraging students to engage in departmental initiatives and have moved research seminars/events online so that they can be more easily accessible. This has been beneficial during the COVID pandemic, and has the added benefit of breaking down the social barriers inherent in face-to-face events if students wish to attend sessions outside of their home Department.

2.21 Our Visiting Scholar Seminars, supported by our Research and Knowledge Exchange Department (ILES-2.9), and our new 'Distinguished Address Series' have proved particularly popular with PGR students. The latter has allowed PGR students to connect their own research with current issues and trends occurring in the world of practice. Following feedback in the PRES Survey, we have run specific workshops requested by students (e.g. LISREL, MPlus) and we usually hold two annual symposia. The first is for DBA students and the second for PhD students (the latter an event run jointly between the Business Schools of Aston, Warwick and Birmingham Universities as part of the ESRC DTP). In addition, we host an EREBUS colloquium for PhD students (particularly CASE award supported students).

2.22 During this REF period, the ABS Research Degrees Programme team provided administrative support for PGR student recruitment, admissions, training and monitoring in the school. In 2020, the Graduate School was re-organised (see ILES 1.3) and a centralised team formed. The centralisation brought greater consistency of practice, efficient processes and the sharing of best practice. This team now take responsibility for managing our PGR student investment fund. Each PGR student in ABS receives an allocation of £1500 (split across three years) to invest in conference attendance, specialist training or other developmental activity.

2.23 A full suite of counselling services exists for all students. PGR students are all encouraged to make use of these services, and receive regular reminders. This has been particularly important during 2020 due to Covid-19, and we are aware of the increased risk of mental health issues. Many staff across the University have trained as Mental Health First Aiders (**27** University / **3** ABS) or Mental Health Champions (**25** University / **4** ABS). These individuals act as a first point of contact for problems outside of the support mechanisms mentioned above. Each one is a skilled listener that can signpost staff or students to the right type of service quickly, efficiently and with empathy and confidentiality.

Section 3. Income, infrastructure and facilities

Income

3.1 Our average research income per year has increased from **£2.0m** in the last REF period to **£2.7m** in this REF period, with 2019/20 showing our highest ever research income total at **£3.4m**.

3.2 T&R staff in ABS have worked hard to improve the quality of grant applications and the number of submissions. Over the last 6 academic years (2014/15 onwards) staff have applied for more than **£75.8m** worth of grants and have been awarded just over **£20.3m** (versus £56.3m and £15.2m for the previous 6 academic years). This demonstrates around **35%** growth in the value of grant applications and a **34%** growth in the value of awards.

3.3 T&R Staff in ABS have focused on developing a more diverse and sustainable funding base, targeting 'blue chip' funders and alternative funding streams. In this REF period, we have won **£4,707,667** from Research Councils (compared to **£3,607,701** in the previous REF period) with

£2,950,576 of that total won in the last two financial years (PIs: **Chowdhury, Batista, Masi, Baines, Salim, Ram, Tolikas, Hart, Narayanan, Bigdeli, Schroeder**). We have increased our EU grant capture to **£9,430,720** in this REF period (from **£2,293,605** in the previous REF period) through a mixture of EU Commission and ERDF awards. While we have had a slightly more cautious approach to European Funding over the last few years (due to Brexit) we are looking forward to the opportunities that association with Horizon Europe will bring (particularly around cybersecurity, European disaster-resilience and circular economy). Some examples of our other successful grant capture over the REF period include:

- £3.6m from the Goldman Sachs Foundation
- £1.3m from UK Government and Health
- £0.7m from Charities
- £0.5m from Lloyds Bank Plc
- £0.4m from Wisconsin Women's Business Initiative Foundation
- £0.4m from the International Development Research Centre

3.4 By employing teaching only staff to complement our T&R staff provision, we have allowed T&R staff to focus on research activities and provided increased capacity to agree additional study leave. The support provided by RKE, particularly the Strategic Funding Managers, and Grants and Contracts Officers (ILES 2.8), has honed our grant application process and is a major factor in our grant successes. RKE work strategically with the ABS Associate Dean for Research and Research Convenors to improve the overall levels of grant applications as well as mentor academics individually to increase success rates. Their expertise helps staff in ABS accurately assess the funding landscape, make decisions on what Grand Challenges to target and build effective collaborations. Working together, our interventions help foster interdisciplinary research (ILES 2.9) and increase the quality of grant applications to major funders (ILES 4.5).

Infrastructure and Facilities

3.5 All T&R staff and doctoral researchers link into an academic Department, which is the structure through which we manage staff within ABS, and it provides the backbone for research and teaching operations. A description of each Department is provided below alongside details of the Category A staff within our submission, their publication history and award totals over the REF period (with the * denoting staff who have supervised doctoral students to completion during the REF period):

3.5.1 Accounting (ACC) has a reputation for research in three key areas: 1) Auditing and Governance, 2) Accountability and Sustainability and 3) Accounting Education and Pedagogy.

- *Research Awards:* **11** worth **£217k**
- *Top Funders:* Wesleyan Assurance Society (**£69k**); European Commission (**£50k**) and British Council (**£15k**)
- *Publications:* **150** (average **21.4** per year)
- *Cat A Staff profile:* Cordery; Mack; De Loo*; Manochin*; Arikan; Basioudis*; Riaz; Wynter*; Yates; Ahmad; Xue; Salijeni; Neokleous.

3.5.2 Economics, Finance and Entrepreneurship (EFE) produces research on 1) Economics, 2) Innovation and Entrepreneurship, 3) International Business and 4) Finance.

- *Research Awards:* **82** worth **£11.3m**
- *Top Funders:* Goldman Sachs Foundation (**£3.6m**); ESRC (**£2.7m**) and ERDF (**£1.6m**)

- *Publications: 434* (average **62.0** per year)
- *Cat A Staff profile:* Du*; Olczak*; Liu; Jones; Karoglou*; Mickiewicz*; Temouri*; Hart*; Azevedo; Chaudhry; Jones*; Nguyen; Roberts; Ram; Song; Cao; Stafylas; Sadeghi; Bouguerra; Shepotylo; Becker*; Izushi; Idris; Delis; Bissoondeeal*; Danakol; Colaco; Rewilak; Kozlovskaya; Elliott; Tsiaras.

3.5.3 Law (LAW) focuses on research relating to 1) Contract and Property Rights, 2) Corporate Law and Financial Services, 3) Law and Technology and 4) Legal Education.

- *Research Awards: 5* worth **£89k**
- *Top Funders:* The Leverhulme Trust (**£82k**); Modern Law Review (**£5k**) and British and Irish Law Education and Technology Association (**£1.5k**)
- *Publications: 142* (average **20.3** per year)
- *Cat A Staff profile:* Brenncke; Cooper; Nair; Salmons*; Brown*; Umfreville; Shaw-Mellors; Harbinja; Salim; Patel*; Otabor-Olubor; Goddard*; Cash.

3.5.4 Marketing and Strategy (M&S) research focuses on 1) Retailing, 2) Sales and Innovation, 3) Strategy as Practice and 4) Decision Making and Strategy Process.

- *Research Awards: 5* worth **£88k**
- *Top Funders:* British Council (**£30k**); Association of Translational Companies Ltd (**£30k**) and The British Academy (**£19k**)
- *Publications: 218* (average **31.1** per year)
- *Cat A Staff profile:* Gilliland*; Burke*; O'Regan*; Marshall*; Pyrko; Ackfeldt; De Kervenoael*; Combe*; Farrell*; Radfard; Omidvar-Tehrani*; Carrington; Shepherd.

3.5.5 Operations and Information Management (OIM) focuses research on 1) Systems Modelling and Simulation, 2) Business Analytics, 3) Operations Management, 4) Global ICT Management and 5) Advanced Services.

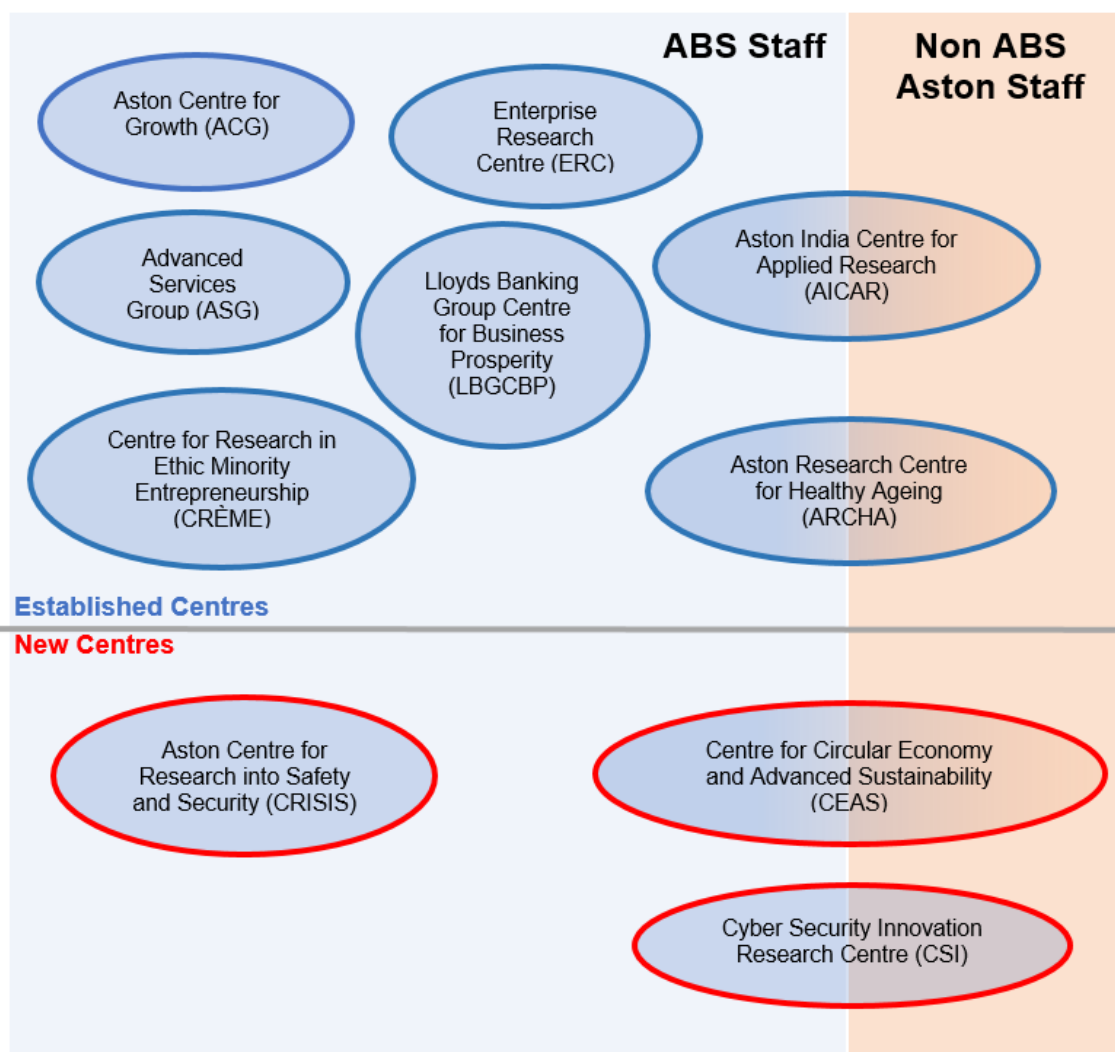
- *Research Awards: 78* worth **£7.9m**
- *Top Funders:* ESIF/ERDF (**£2.6m**); EPSRC (**£1.4m**) and EU Commission (**£1.1m**)
- *Publications: 621* (average **88.7** per year)
- *Cat A Staff profile:* Emrouznejad*; Baines; Benson; Beltagui; Thanassoulis*; Dey*; Masi; Dehnokjalaji; Edwards*; Bigdeli; Clegg*; Batista; Schroeder*; Rodriguez-Espindola; Nunes*; Petridis; Albores*; Higson*; Malesios; Greasley*; Uren*; Chowdhury; Liu; Despoudi; Joel-Edgar; Panchal; Anastasakis*; Luo; Giraleas*.

3.5.6 Work and Organisation (WON) produce research on 1) Leadership and Innovation, 2) International and Strategic HRM, 3) Diversity, Inclusion and Meaningful Work and 4) Corporate Social Responsibility, Ethics and Sustainability.

- *Research Awards: 21* worth **£3.2m**
- *Top Funders:* ERDF (**£2.2m**); International Development Research Centre (**£390k**) and European Commission (**£316k**)
- *Publications: 310* (average **44.3** per year)
- *Cat A Staff profile:* Budhwar*; Rivkin; Sacramento*; Theodorakopoulos*; Fletcher; Scully*; Stollberger; Crawshaw*; Meliou; Borland; Butler*; Kazmi*; Narayanan; Carter*; Arora; Badigannavar*; Napiersky; Babu; Ayres.

3.6 In addition to Departments, T&R staff in ABS are heavily involved in the activities of seven well-established Research Centres (depicted in the top half of Figure 2).

Figure 2. Research centres that operate with expertise from ABS staff



In ABS, the Research Centres connect our expertise to the challenges found in the wider world that we can influence most effectively. Since REF2014, the sustainability of Research Centres, and the level of impact they achieve, have been key criteria for continuing to support their development or deciding to allocate resources elsewhere. During this REF period, we have created three new Research Centres, disbanded three Research Centres and will establish three new Research Centres in Spring 2021 (Figure 2). Each centre will focus on meeting “grand challenges”, working across disciplines and capitalising on research funding opportunities.

3.7 Listed below you will find a description of the six Research Centres led by ABS. The figures reported below form part of the departmental award totals (in 3.5) as the University reports on awards by departmental associations. Further information on the collaboration and beneficiary impact of centres is available in section 4.

Aston Centre for Growth (ACG)

Established in 2014 as a response to local SMEs who needed targeted growth support. Led by Paula Whitehouse (Director), and supported by **Hart** (Associate Director), the Centre has received funding from ERDF and the Greater Birmingham and Solihull LEP totalling over **£1.7m**. Their relationship with the Goldman Sachs Foundation has continued to generate

significant awards (**£3.6m**) during this REF period, including the highest single award within ABS (**£1,459,492** in 2014). Through the Centre, T&R staff have engaged directly with business leaders who required leadership and management expertise.

Enterprise Research Centre (ERC)

The UK's leading centre of excellence for research into the growth, innovation and productivity of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). A joint collaboration (led at Aston by **Hart**) between Aston University, Warwick University and Queen's University Belfast, it connects research on SME growth to key stakeholders in the public and private sector (e.g. banks, government departments, local enterprise partnerships). At Aston, the ERC has received funding worth over **£1.7m** during the current REF period (initially from ESRC, BEIS, Innovate UK, Intellectual Property Office and the British Business Bank with additional funding from organisations including JP Morgan Chase, Scottish Enterprise and the Design Council). The Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM), run in conjunction with ERC, has received funding of **£417k** through organisations like Invest Northern Ireland, Welsh Assembly Government and BEIS.

Centre for Research in Ethnic Minority Entrepreneurship (CREME)

Led by **Ram**, the Centre focuses on the production of pioneering research and impact that promote diversity and ethnic enterprise. Since Ram joined ABS in 2018, the Centre has benefitted from internal support and investment enabling them to win funding from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). This includes ESRC DTP Collaborative Studentships (with partners including Citizens UK), and larger collaborative projects such as the PROPEL Hub (**Ram: £149k**) and Productivity from Below (**Ram: £726k**).

Advanced Services Group (ASG)

ASG is an international leader in research underpinning the adoption of servitization and outcome-based business models. The Centre (led by **Baines, Bigdeli, Schroeder** and **Beltagui**) has an excellent record of internationally leading research publications with co-authors from across the globe. The Centre receives support through a portfolio of funding (from industry, EPSRC, ESRC, BBSRC and Innovate UK). Examples include, an ESRC New Investigator Awards for a project on Pathways to Servitization (**Bigdeli: £205k**), an EPSRC award for Digitally Enhanced Advanced Services (**Baines: £142k**) and an ERDF Funded project for Advanced Services Growth (**Baines: £723k**).

Lloyds Banking Group Centre for Business Prosperity (LBGCBP)

Founded in 2017 (and led by **Du**), the Centre consists of an international network of researchers and receives funding (over **£500k** to date) from Lloyds Banking Group to support research activities. The Centre works to generate further understanding of what affects UK economic performance, and is particularly active in the areas of trade, productivity and skills with a focus on understanding the challenges in the UK, and what will help drive economic growth. Its work has led various forms of media coverage, articles in The Conversation, parliamentary evidence and the production of a range of white papers and reports.

Aston India Centre for Applied Research (AICAR)

The Centre (led by **Budhwar, Dey** and **Arora**), brings together scholars from across the University's three Colleges. Its focus is creating and disseminating multidisciplinary knowledge for corporations in India or with Indian interests, the objective being to help

researchers and policy makers to improve the operations and profitability of corporations. ABS staff within this Centre have contributed to its success through grant awards, including the British Academy Small Grants Scheme (**Badigannavar: £9.5k; Budhwar: £9.5k**), Horizon 2020 (**Dey: £35k**) and the International Development Research Centre (Arora: **£391k**).

3.8 In 2021, ABS will have three new Research Centres, these are:

Aston Centre for Research into Safety and Security (CRISIS)

CRISIS (led by **Albores**) will conduct research that helps others to respond to, and recover from, crises and disaster-related incidents.

Centre for Circular Economy and Advanced Sustainability (CEAS)

An interdisciplinary Centre (led by **Batista**) that places the Circular Economy at the forefront of managerial and technological innovations that enable transformational sustainability.

Cyber Security Innovation (CSI) Research Centre

CSI (led by **Benson**) addresses cyber security issues by linking interdisciplinary academic expertise with cyber security experts in industry and Government.

3.9 Each Research Centre has to demonstrate a positive impact on our beneficiaries (ILES 1.1) and a continued commitment of time, energy and expertise to ensure it achieves and maintains success. As such, all Research Centres undergo regular review and report into Research Committee. The Centre Directors are all experienced academics with excellent award successes, extensive networks and are committed to delivering excellent research with impact. Their expertise is integral to the coaching and mentoring of other members of staff and the relationships developed allow further collaborative opportunities to materialise.

3.10 All staff members from ABS are encouraged to develop interdisciplinary research (ILES 2.9) and to look for opportunities to become active members of University Research Institutes (ILES 2.5) and Research Centres that sit outside ABS. For instance, the Aston Institute for Forensic Linguistics (AIFL) sits within BSS and has links with each of its Schools alongside links to the wider University. Aston Research Centre for Healthy Ageing, is led from College of Health and Life Sciences, and has strong representation from ABS (see figure 2 above).

Key Roles, Committees and Support Mechanisms

3.11 The ABS Research Committee (chaired by the Associate Dean Research: **O'Regan**) is held three times per year. The Committee considers all research related issues for staff and students, and feeds into the School-based Senior Management Team, Graduate School Management Committee (ILES 3.15) and the University Research Committee (ILES 2.2). In addition, a College focussed Research Strategy Forum, brings together colleagues from across BSS to discuss topical research issues, share best practice ideas and take responsibility for implementing the College Research Strategy.

3.12 The ABS Research Ethics Committee has multi-disciplinary membership, including staff and research student representation from across the faculty. The Chair of the Ethics Committee (**Tehrani**) reports directly to the Associate Dean Research. The Committee has specific responsibility for advising staff members and research students about research that involves human participants and the collection of data, or where governance needs closer scrutiny. It links

directly into the University Research Ethics Committee, with support and expertise provided by the University's Research Integrity Office (ILES 2.12).

3.13 Each Department has a Research Convenor (RC: **Cooper, Salijeni, Neokleous, Farrell, Beltagui, Crawshaw, Chaudhury**). The RC is a source of knowledge, guidance and mentorship for all things research within the department. Each RC is a member of Research Committee and the Research Strategy Forum. Within each Department, the RC is responsible for organising and developing colloquium and seminars that attract staff and PGR students from across ABS and the wider University. These meetings and events are the foundation for building internal networks, sharing best practice and integrating PGR students into the research environment. For much of the current REF period RCs were responsible for organising visiting international scholars and facilitating visits of ABS staff to collaborating institutions (this process is now administered centrally: ILES 2.9). These collaborations, alongside conference attendance, underpin the high rate of international co-authorship of publications that we have achieved. For instance, our Law Department hosted **Associate Professor David Brown** (Adelaide University) as a Visiting Scholar in 2018. He helped with a range of activities during this time at Aston including hosting research seminars and delivering a paper at the Aston hosted Insolvency Law Conference. Our Accounting Department hosted **Professor David Hay** (Auckland Business School) in 2018. Alongside presentations to staff and students, he collaborated with colleagues on journal articles and on a book 'Public Sector Audit' (with **Cordery**).

3.14 T&R staff receive administrative research support through the ABS Research Office. The Associate Dean Research (**O'Regan**) is the academic lead for research in the School, and is a member of University Research Committee (ILES 2.2). He has overall responsibility for the allocation of internal pump-priming funding, the development of the research environment and the support provided within ABS to help us attain excellent research with impact. It is through his leadership, and his position within the School Senior Management Team that the vitality, sustainability and reputation of our research continues to grow.

3.15 The Research Office oversees the administration of key research areas including internal funding; research integrity and ethics (ILES 2.11; 2.12); PGR student issues (ILES 3.15 - 3.19); as well as specific conference and event management. The team organise bespoke research training for staff, monitor key performance indicators (that link to the Research Strategy) and produce reports for senior members of staff. They are also heavily involved in communicating research information to ABS staff and curating online research information resources. The team have excellent relationships with Professional Service departments across the University in particular HR, Finance, Library, Organisational Development and RKE with regular meetings scheduled and combined activities planned. The team have close working relationships with the Graduate School Administration Team (ILES 3.15), the ABS Director of Research Degree Programmes (**Crawshaw**) and ABS Postgraduate Research Students (ILES 3.15).

3.16 One of the most important functions of the Research Office is the organisation and delivery of conferences and events. A small specialist team within the Research Office help T&R staff generate conference and event ideas that will enhance the research environment and deliver value to our beneficiaries (ILES 1.1). For example, the team worked alongside ABS academics to organise and deliver events, such as the *Management Accountants Research Group (MARG) Conference*, the *Sales Educators' Academy (SEA) Conference* and the *Spring Servitization Conference (SSC)*. We also hosted the *2019 British Academy of Management (BAM) conference*

that over 1000 delegates attended (the largest BAM event to date). BAM noted that feedback from the 2019 conference was highly favourable, with a delegate suggesting it was *'the best conference that I have attended, where we learned about Aston's impressive research, in addition to the usual research papers presented at the conference'*. ABS is one of only two Schools (alongside Warwick University) to host the BAM conference three times (**2003, 2011** and **2019**).

3.17 In August 2020, the ABS Research Office combined with staff from other Schools within the College of Business and Social Sciences to form a College Research Office. The new structure provides greater efficiency, better oversight and more importantly the sharing of best practice within research administration. It also means that we can extend the expertise within our Conference and Events team for the benefit of the College.

3.18 The Aston University Library works closely with staff across UoA17 to ensure that PURE (our Current Research Information System, ILES 4.9) is up to date and catalogues all our research effectively. All our staff have PURE profiles on Aston Research Explorer alongside details of all publications. Colleagues in the Library provide expertise on Open Access publishing (ILES 2.14), and Open Data (ILES 2.15); they consistently update staff on changes within the publishing landscape. Open Access and Research Repository Specialists in the Library help reinforce our requirements under DORA and provided expertise that underpins the University Policy for the Responsible Use of Research Metrics (ILES 2.13).

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

4.1 Research within ABS focuses on developing impactful insights through collaborating with our key stakeholders: students, business and the professions, the region and society (ILES 1.1). We have prioritised the development of a stronger international research network and working partnerships and since 2014, we have developed and matured a richer range of collaborative relationships (section 1.7.2a). The international focus of our work comes through in the publications and impact case studies that form the basis for our REF2021 submission. Additionally, our new College structure (Figure 1) will aid our ability to work collaboratively, with increased interdisciplinarity, while maintaining international diversity. While growing our international reach is important, we have been able to show a sustained and significant impact at a local level as well. Local beneficiaries remain an important aspect of our work.

4.2 Aston Centre for Growth has translated excellent research (**Hart, Baines, Clegg, Theodorakopoulos and ERC**) into impactful activity and beneficiary reward. It is the umbrella for a number of different successful programmes (e.g. productivity through people, mentoring for growth, small business leadership programme) and built on the success of the Goldman Sachs *10,000 Small Businesses* programme (run within ABS since 2011 to facilitate knowledge exchange for small businesses regionally and nationally). The programmes offered focus on practical techniques, which deliver improved managerial skills and increased productivity, underpinned by leading research. The Centre has contributed to the creation of over **650 jobs**, increased productivity of local SMEs by **28%** (compared to other businesses) and has supported over **1,000** business with over **23,000** hours of peer-to-peer learning. The relationships developed have also led to additional student placements, increased mentoring capacity and greater assistance for start-ups.

4.3 The Enterprise Research Centre's research on Leadership & Management was instrumental in developing the business case for the Small Business Leadership Programme for SMEs in the UK by BEIS in the summer of 2020. The research contributions of the [Global Entrepreneurship Monitor](#) (GEM) project (led by **Hart**) provides government (national, regional and local) with measures of entrepreneurial attitudes, activity and aspiration in the UK compared to around 70 other countries. The UK Government, as well as the three devolved administrations, use data from GEM as a key metric on entrepreneurial dynamism. It has led to work with, for example, the OECD and the World Economic Forum and was a key data source for the Rose Review on Female Entrepreneurship in the UK in 2018 and the FSB report in 2020 on Ethnic Minority Businesses.

4.4 The Centre for Research in Ethnic Minority Entrepreneurship (CREME) works with SMEs, business policy makers and larger influential organisations to help often overlooked or disregarded business practitioner communities. For instance, CREME has worked closely with Citizens UK to provide an effective route to engage with local communities, understand the issues they face and find ways to help them. Through this CREME have supported ethnic enterprises to access Government support (ILES 4.11). CREME have excelled at bringing together colleagues from across different disciplines in ABS, particularly colleagues from our EFE and WON departments. External partnerships are a key part of the work of CREME, and they include larger organisations like Balfour Beatty Vinci and NatWest (partners on the ERDF funded Diverse Supply Chain Project). Their 'Productivity from Below' project includes partners like Ashley Community Housing, the Bangladeshi Network, Citizens UK and Punch Records. The project, although in its early stages, has already supported businesses during the pandemic and has led to the establishment of two peer support groups for entrepreneurs (one for creative entrepreneurs and one for Business Leaders in microbusinesses). CREME was instrumental in Aston University becoming a principal partner of Citizens UK Birmingham (an independent membership alliance of civil society institutions acting together for the common good of the city).

4.5 The Advanced Services Group (ASG) has had a significant local impact (through supporting over **200** smaller enterprises) while also building its reputation and research collaborations internationally, with organisations such as Goodyear (Akron, USA), Crown Equipment (New Bremen, USA) and Omron (Italy & Spain). ASG is the founder of the Spring Servitization Conference, hosted in Denmark, Switzerland, Sweden and Italy, and attracts delegates from across the world, including the USA, Japan, China and Australia. ASG also co-leads the EPSRC's Network plus for Digitally Enabled Advanced Services. ASG's success in aligning research, and the delivery of impact, forms the basis of a good practice case study, commissioned by EPSRC in 2016.

4.6 The Innovation Vouchers project (**Theodorakopoulos: REF2021 Case Study**) has helped generate business innovation and growth activities within SMEs across the local region. ABS received the second phase of ERDF funding in 2016 to further the work of this project. Stage 1 of the project allowed SMEs to access a voucher, worth up to **€2,800**, to support innovation that delivered new goods, services or improved processes (which the SME match funds 50:50). Stage 2 consists of workshops, led by academics, that help SMEs become more competitive through innovation and growth activities. ABS worked in collaboration with Birmingham City University to deliver this project. The case studies and testimonials provided by beneficiaries highlight the importance of this project for the local SME economy.

4.7 The Transformation Project (**Butler**) has helped transform project management practices across SMEs in the West Midlands and has been able to transfer those practices internationally. For instance, Kenyan SME networks approached project leaders for help to improve their growth capability, one of the UNs sustainable development goals. The project team worked closely with Strathmore University Business School (Nairobi) to help them evaluate their entrepreneurship programmes. This work led to a new financial literacy centre gaining approval from the Strathmore University Board that affected a range of different industries including building technologies, professional services and food/beverage.

4.8 The work conducted on Peace in Somalia (**Kazmi**) contributes to UN Sustainable Development Goal 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) by involving Somali companies in the national process of peace and reconciliation in Somalia. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM) and the Federal Government of Somalia have included and prioritised “Business, Peace and Development” as a key national policy objective in 2018 through the work of this project. Additionally, Creative Alternative Now (NGO), Rift Valley Institute (NGO), UNSOM, Norwegian Embassy and Aston Business School have established a Community of Practice on “Business, Peace and Development” in 2019 which is facilitating the interaction between Somali companies and policy makers and has produced a research and action framework.

4.9 The University has an excellent history in delivering successful Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTPs), including recent recognition for this at the Innovate UK ‘Best of the Best’ Awards (ILES 2.6). ABS have had previous successes in KTPs over the REF period, including KTPs such as:

- ‘To develop a suite of configurable tools to enhance interpretation of internet usage data’ with Majestic 12 Ltd (**Du; Karoglou: £186k**);
- ‘To create an easily transferable model for the management and treatment of vulnerable groups of patients within an independent optometry practice’ with BBR Optometry (**Ackfeldt: £213k**);
- ‘To deliver significant productivity improvements and support business growth through the implementation of a digital operations strategy’ with A-Gas Electronic Materials (**Beltagui; Masi: £185k**).

Our KTP with Higgs & Sons (**Scully, Clegg, Budhwar: £121k**) proved particularly successful, and was:

- Shortlisted for the ‘*Innovative Law Firm of the year*’ by the International Legal Technology Association (2016);
- Winner of the ‘*Achieving Cultural Transformation*’ Award by the College of Law Management Practice (2014);
- Winner of *Excellence in Practice* Award by the European Foundation for Management Development (2014);
- Received ‘*Outstanding*’ Achievement Certificate (2014) from the KTP Grading Panel.

We are continuing to promote and build capacity in the area of KTPs. With the implementation of management focused KTPs through Innovate UK, this is a springboard for further activity and collaboration with industry partners.

4.10 Staff in ABS are encouraged to contribute towards global thought leadership on research-related activities and gain recognition from institutions and peers for their expertise. For instance, we have Fellows in the Academy of Social Science (**Baines, Budhwar, Dey, Hart, O'Regan and Ram**); an organisation whose remit is to promote social science for public benefit. We also have Fellows in the Chartered Association of Business Schools (e.g. **Hart**) and others whose expertise extends past Business and Management, such as Fellowship of the Institution of Engineers and Technologists (**Baines**). Many of our staff have also won awards, such as the Queen's Award for Enterprise Promotion (**Hart**) and the Citizen UK Birmingham Leader of the Year (**Ram**). Our ability to positively influence and affect those around us, and to lead by example, is encouraged within ABS, for example:

4.10.1 Local Region: Alongside the work outlined above, particularly the positive effect we have had on SMEs, colleagues have been able to contribute towards the local region in other ways. For instance, we have representation on the Leadership of Citizens UK Birmingham (**RAM**) and the Chair of the Community Intelligence Group (**Higson**) for Birmingham City Council. Additionally, **Higson** has the honour of being [Vice Lord-Lieutenant](#) for the West Midlands. It is the second largest lieutenancy in England and Wales and involves acting as The Queen's representative for the region, supporting local initiatives that provide benefit to the region and recognise people and organisations that help others.

4.10.2 Government/Parliament: we have established links with Government Departments, Parliamentary Committees and Groups through a number of academic colleagues. For instance, we have provided advice to the No.10 Commission on Race Equality Enterprise Track (**Ram, Chaudhry**) and the Small Business Finance Select Committee (**Chaudhry**). Our work with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) has been particularly effective through our expert advice in the External Peer Review Group (**Du, Hart**) and our advice to Government (HMT, BEIS and the British Business Bank) on how to help small businesses through the pandemic (**Hart**). We have also been able to influence the Equality and Diversity agenda at national level through the Equality Advisory Group within BEIS (**Ram**) and have an important voice in the Evidence Working Group within the UK Council for Internet Safety (**Nair**). We work closely with the Industry and Parliament Trust and presented to members of the House of Lords, House of Commons and Senior Industry Leaders on 'Productivity in the UK: People, Process and Technology' (**Clegg**), trade links between India and the UK (**Budhwar**) and growth in SMEs following Brexit (**Hart**).

4.10.3 Collaboration with Business: our collaboration with business, and our determination to continue to forge links between academia and practice, extends past the local region. For instance, we have Board representation (**Baines**) on the Through-Life Engineering Services (TES) centre. TES is a national centre established through funding from EPSRC and industry to provide world-class capability for product delivery, availability and reliability and involves core partners, such as Rolls-Royce, BAE Systems and Bombardier. We also have representation on the National Council for University and Business (**Higson**) and the Centre for Responsible Business (**Budhwar**). Our ability to influence management practices, across all of the UK, comes from key membership in the British Academy of Management (**O'Regan, Budhwar**).

4.10.4 Higher Education: we are helping to shape the direction of Higher Education through a number of different channels. **Higson** is a Board Membership of Advance HE (and Chair of their Peer Review Committee) and a Trustee of the Society for Research in Higher Education (and Chair of their Governance and Appointments Committee). Colleagues in ABS are encouraged to think about how we can influence academic practice nationally and internationally, not just at a local level.

4.10.5 International Influence: our international reputation is important, as is our ability to influence business, society and practice at a global level. For instance, we have a member practitioner (**Cordery**) on the Advisory Group for International Reporting for Non-profit Organisations, a project developing reporting guidance for Non-profit Organisations with the standards forming the basis for global best practice. One of our British Academy/Leverhulme projects (**Badigannavar**) resulted in the formation of an Indian trade union for Scheduled Caste and Tribe workers. Other examples include consultation for the Cayman Islands Law Reform Commission (**Cooper**), Board membership on the International Association for Management of Technology (**Theodorakopoulos**) and membership in the Employers Federation of India (**Badigannavar**). We have Visiting Professors in institutions across the world, such as Inner Mongolia University (**Du**) and the Indian Management Development Institute (**Budhwar**), and some of our academics have gained recognition in 'Stanford's World Top Scientist List' (**Ram**) and '100 Most Influential in UK India Relations' 2nd Edition (**Budhwar**).

4.10.6 Publication Expertise: Alongside producing well regarded, original and rigorous research, we also try to positively influence the quality of journals, and their content, through Editorial positions (e.g. **Nair, Emrouzenjad, Mickiewicz, Basioudis, Gilliland**), Associate Editor (e.g. **Farrell, Ackfeldt, Du, Crawshaw**), Consulting Editor (e.g. **Budhwar, Edwards**) and Editorial Board Membership (e.g. **Chaudhry, Theodorakopoulos, Basioudis, Gilliland, Stollberger, Crawshaw, O'Regan**). Additionally, we have staff members who have co-founded journals (e.g. **O'Regan**: Journal of Strategy and Management and Journal of Family Business Management) and who co-edit the Indian Academy of Management Book Series (**Budhwar**).

COVID-19 Pandemic.

4.11 There has been work done by colleagues in ABS, during the pandemic, which has turned a difficult situation into an opportunity for further collaboration. For instance, in Economics, Finance and Entrepreneurship, **Mickiewicz** ran weekly online entrepreneurship seminars, which include discussion around research methods, particular readings, funded research and previous completed projects. This brought interested parties from inside Aston together with academics from Birmingham, Reading, Southampton and Staffordshire Universities. Our Accounting Department have developed a virtual accounting roundtable (to share research within the department), a 'Research Lounge' online (an informal way to discuss ideas and get feedback) and developed collaborative working methodologies with MS OneNote. Another example is how the Lloyds Banking Group Centre for Business Prosperity (**Du**) organised a virtual West Midlands Training and Productivity Workshop that brought together staff and students from Universities across the West Midlands area. They were able to share ideas with some of the best economists and management scholars and it helped enhance academic networks right across the West Midlands.

4.12 ABS Research Centres have been working hard to inform, advise and respond to the challenges presented due to the pandemic. Aston Centre for Growth has been particularly active during this period. The podcast series produced by the Centre during 2020 brought together the expertise of small business leaders with ABS academics to help other SMEs survive the crisis. The podcasts informed the work of the Enterprise Research Centre in advising the UK Government on business support responses (**Hart**). **Hart** was a member of the Greater Birmingham and Solihull Local Enterprise Partnership (GBSLEP) Recovery Task Force (2020), at the request of the LEP Chair, and was involved in designing a key grant programme (Pivot and Prosper) that dispersed **£2m** to **45** local SMEs. The Lloyds Banking Group Centre for Business **Prosperity** has also been actively involved in responding to the pandemic through an insight paper on 'Covid-19 Pandemic and Global Value Chains', alongside contributions to [The Conversation](#), the [World Economic Forum](#) and a [Parliamentary Inquiry](#).