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Vice-Chancellor’s introduction

The development and articulation of Aston University’s strategy gives us the opportunity to communicate clearly our ambition, our objectives, and our priorities; to state what is most important to us, and to identify our points of distinction.

This strategy has been framed differently from most university strategies, and deliberately so. Most strategies are defined around the principal activities of the university; usually research, education, and engagement. Instead, we have structured this strategy around the beneficiaries of Aston University, who are the parties external to the University and whom we exist to serve. We will continue to offer support to our beneficiaries because their future success is critical to us.

We have categorised our beneficiaries into three groups:

1. our students, who progress to be our graduates and alumni;
2. external organisations (comprising businesses, public entities, the not-for-profit sector, and the professions), who employ our students, and also engage with us directly on research and educational programmes;
3. Birmingham and the West Midlands region, and wider society whom we serve as a public university, with a strong sense of place.

These groups do not only benefit from their engagement with us; they are also, directly or indirectly, the providers of almost all the funding on which we, and other universities, exist. If we understand and meet the needs of our beneficiaries, our future success is well-assured.

Another important feature of this strategy is its strong focus on our role within Birmingham and the West Midlands region. We continue to play a critical role in the economic development of our region. Further, our strong links with our region and businesses, supporting our focus on highly-employable graduates and research with impact, underpins our international reputation and attraction to students and partners abroad.

This strategy commits us to making the choices about what Aston aspires to be known for, nationally and internationally, and accepting the implicit trade-offs. We will not shy away from these decisions, and will comprehensively review our education and research programmes to concentrate our resources in areas of real current, or clear future potential.

The execution of this strategy rests primarily with the staff of Aston, across academic and professional roles. Our values and culture are vital and we will draw on these to assist us in serving our beneficiaries.

I thank all members of the Aston community and key stakeholders for their input into this plan, and for your support in its implementation.
There are four fundamental ideas that describe the strategy:

1. Building on our track record, our founding purpose continues to be valuable and can be leveraged in local, national and international contexts.

2. Our strategy is framed around three key beneficiary groups - students, business and the professions, and our region and society.

3. We must focus and strengthen how we deliver our core activities.

4. We will remain focused on our beneficiaries, having a clear vision of what we will offer them and how we will offer it. We will review and align our current activities.
The higher education environment is volatile and there will be challenges to Aston’s currently strong sector position.

Our strengths include:

- a diverse student population with high rates of graduate employability and excellent performance in other measures of graduate outcomes
- good relationships with business and local industry for placements, collaborative research and training courses
- high quality, exploitable research that is accessible for business and has a positive impact on society
- a collegiate and proud workforce which is committed to the values of higher education
- prominent and influential alumni across major sectors locally, nationally and internationally

Major drivers of change in the higher education sector include government policy, economic growth, demographic changes, increased provider competition and the impact of technology on teaching and learning.

Together these factors mean that to be a successful university in the future, we will need to:

- be more distinctive
- diversify revenue generation by being customer-focused and market-led
- maintain clear value propositions for the different beneficiary groups
- demonstrate continuing relevance to industry partners
- operate professionally with agility and pace

Our new strategy is the framework to allow us to deliver on those requirements.
Mission, vision and values

Mission

To be the UK’s leading university for students aspiring to succeed in business and the professions, where original research, enterprise and inspiring teaching deliver local and global impact.

Vision

In 2023 Aston will have an international reputation for delivery of outstanding graduate outcomes and equipping business and communities with the skills for future success.

Values

Aston is professional and ambitious
The University believes this is a prerequisite to realise our mission and vision, and will be recognised by businesses and external organisations as shared values which make Aston an attractive partner for research and education.

Aston is innovative and collaborative
The University works across disciplines, institutions and partners to be proactive in creating and implementing new ideas, to be a leader in modern educational techniques and to undertake research which inspires staff, students and external partners.

Aston is ethical and inclusive
The University recognises its responsibility to be an exemplar of behaviour and conduct in all that it does. It will leverage the diversity of its staff and student body to achieve outcomes for its beneficiaries and provide opportunities for education and professional development to all.
Our revised strategy focuses on desired outcomes for the University’s main beneficiaries:
- students
- business and the professions
- our region and society

We are motivated by those we benefit and these beneficiaries will be the main focus of our strategic direction over the next five years.

Our operations deliver four core activities to support our beneficiaries. These activities are not unique to Aston – however, emphasis on the right aspect of each activity to support beneficiary outcomes will ensure we maintain our distinct position in the sector.

Our core offering will continue to represent value, but it must be sharpened and strengthened to stay relevant. We will:

**Sharpen**

our offering by explicitly investing our resources in areas of outstanding performance, both current and planned, and directing relatively less investment elsewhere.

**Strengthen**

our offering by connecting more effectively and extensively with the community and region in which we are rooted, and taking our strengths to the wider world in order to better contribute to society and diversify revenue generation.

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**Beneficiary structure**

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**Our region and society**
- Capabilities, connections, and prosperity

**Aspirational and high performance**
- The Aston Mission

**Culture and organisation**
- A rewarding career and improved quality of life

**High quality teaching and student support**

**Collaborative research with high translation and impact**

**Skill building and industry development**

**Community engagement and development**

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Beneficiary group 1: students

A core element of the University has always been to deliver outstanding education for our students. We have a long history of successfully teaching a diverse body of students the skills required to thrive in business and the professions, and we will continue to deliver high quality education to students into the future, including our new student population in Oman.

We perform well for student outcomes and satisfaction:

- **Above the UK average** for rates of graduates entering the workforce or further study within six months of graduating
- **2nd in UK** for boosting graduate salaries (The Economist, 2017)
- **88% student satisfaction** in the National Student Survey (2017)

We have the opportunity to reinforce and build on these existing strengths and differentiate ourselves from our competitors. To achieve this, we will need to be agile in our approach to content provision and delivery.

The key outcomes are:

- Students will have high rates of employment in desirable jobs following graduation.
- Students will have a fulfilling educational experience, have developed social capital and be well-equipped to succeed in life.
- Students will be highly skilled in their discipline and have a global and entrepreneurial mindset.

We will continue to produce graduates who are well-equipped to enrich their communities and society.
Beneficiary group 2: business and the professions

Historically, we have differentiated ourselves from other universities through our strong engagement with local industry, business and the public sector. Types of engagement have included student placements, graduate job pathways, co-funded collaborative research and bespoke training courses. We are particularly known for our productive partnerships with local and global SMEs, as well as our strong links to large organisations such as BMW, HSBC, Greater Birmingham Chambers of Commerce, Jaguar Land Rover, the National Crime Agency and Public Health England. These partnerships are managed organically at a devolved level by schools, departments, individual academics or professional service staff.

The key outcomes we will strive to achieve for this beneficiary group are:

- We will teach the skills and knowledge that businesses and professional organisations require to grow.
- We will link businesses, the professions and other organisations to graduate employees and entrepreneurs.
- We will ensure businesses and the professions benefit from our translational research and knowledge exchange activities.

Lasting and positive relationships with business and professional organisations will remain a key feature of our value offering.
Beneficiary group 3: our region and society

We recognise that the West Midlands region and community is integral to our ongoing licence to operate. Our strong ties to the West Midlands are a key enabler for students and business partnerships. A sizeable proportion of our students have always come from local communities and many remain in the region to live and work after graduation. There is also a thread that runs from our local roots through to our international presence, which we can cultivate and expand. The opportunity for us is to identify these excellent relationships and disciplines, and take local successes to the world.

The key outcomes are:

Through widening participation, we will create educational opportunities for the students of our region, regardless of their background.

Our research, innovation and enterprise activities will enhance the economy and improve quality of life in the West Midlands and beyond.

We will build partnerships and global connections through our research collaborators, international alumni and students.

We are not only a cornerstone of the West Midlands – we can be a springboard from the region to the world.
Key enablers of the strategy

For this strategy to achieve sustainable success, the organisation must be fit for purpose. It is critical that we build upon our existing organisational strengths and also evolve to focus our energies and resources most effectively. We will pursue key enabling initiatives early in this strategic plan period to ensure this, as set out below:

- Invest in activities aligned to the strategy and end activities that are not
- Strengthen leadership, operations, systems and facilities
- Embed a high-performance, customer-focused culture
- Increase financial sustainability
Over time, we will reduce and cease activities not directly aligned with this strategy to make the best use of our resources and free up capacity to focus on areas of strength.

We will:

- conduct a review of research activities to reassign resources to research areas that align with our strategic strengths and industry relationships
- evaluate and, as necessary, restructure our educational offering to align with student outcomes

To continue to achieve desired outcomes for beneficiaries, we will need to further embed a high performance culture across the organisation.

The University and its stakeholders hold high aspirations and expectations for each other. However, to continue to achieve desired outcomes for beneficiaries, we will need to further embed a high-performance culture across the organisation. The University-employee relationship is one of respect but also mutual obligation. We recognise the importance of attracting and retaining high quality staff, and will back and support them, in the expectation that they are closely aligned with our desired direction and outcomes for beneficiaries.

We will:

- support our staff to succeed and deliver high quality research and teaching, and recognise the importance of professional staff to this success
- motivate staff and focus on achieving outstanding strategic outcomes for students, businesses and professions, and our region and society
- embed ongoing personal development for staff into the workplace
- operate energetically and dynamically, in a customer-focused manner, prioritising innovation and agility
- support and encourage innovation, with a healthy level of risk tolerance
- understand what constitutes success, reward high performance and manage poor performance
- engage with a range of stakeholder groups across the beneficiaries to ensure we are continually delivering value and anticipating their needs
9. Implications for Aston

There are a number of key implications for the size and shape of Aston as a result of implementing this strategy.

Overview of key size and shape settings that result from Aston’s strategy

Student numbers

% international students

Breadth of offerings/discipline

Domestic tariff level

Student to staff ratio

Volume of research/level of investment

Breadth of research focus

Focus on employer partnerships

Student numbers will increase slightly and with a focus on increasing the percentage of international and postgraduate taught students.

Reducing the breadth of offerings/disciplines in teaching and research will sharpen and strengthen our offerings. This will put more weight behind our existing strengths and leverage our current resources, without reducing the overall volume of research and level of investment.

We will continue to strive for educational excellence and to provide students with an excellent educational experience. To ensure this, we expect our domestic tariff level and student to staff ratio to remain largely unchanged.

Two major themes of this strategy are the connections between Aston and the region and society we live in, and graduate employability and outcomes to differentiate us from our competitors. This will be reflected in an increased focus on employer partnerships including placement programmes, collaborative research, skill development and industry-building outreach.
10. Conclusion and implementation

This strategic plan will begin from spring 2018 with the development of a full five-year implementation plan to deliver the initiatives.

This strategy represents an important marker for Aston and our future direction. We enjoy and appreciate our strong reputation and the range of significant outcomes we have achieved over the decades, in conjunction with our students, our partners and our communities. However, the external environment is constantly shifting. Throughout this strategy period, we may evolve our size, shape and features in response. Yet decisions will be driven at all times by how we can deliver what we do best, to serve our beneficiaries effectively.

Realising the aspiration in this strategy will be challenging but achievable. The Aston community as a whole will now devote its attention and resources to ensure its successful implementation.