

# Access and Participation Plan

2020 - 2025



## Access and participation plan

Aston University has demonstrated a long standing sustained commitment to access, success and employability for its students. Since our founding as an institution in 1895, we have continued to challenge ourselves to provide initiatives which address gaps at access, support student success and enhance graduate outcomes. We are a positive exemplar for widening access, retention and employability. We believe that we truly transform lives. Aston University's 2018-2023 Strategy is structured around our key beneficiaries which include our students, businesses and organisations, and the wider Birmingham and West Midlands region.

The University is also focused on continuous improvement; where we have identified gaps in achievement we are determined to ensure that Aston provides all students with the support to benefit from an education at our institution.

### 1. Assessment of performance

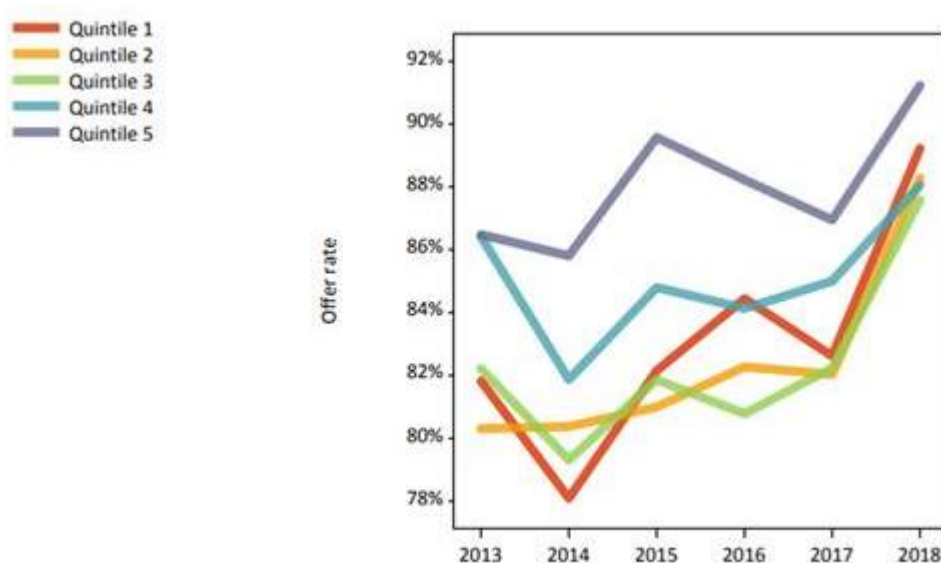
At Aston University our student body is broadly reflective of the demographics of the local community. Our student groups are:

- Asian or Asian British (46.24%)
- White (31.71%)
- Below 20 years old (87.46%)
- Have declared a disability (10.32%)
- From a low household income background of £42, 875 and below (47%)
- From a low household income of £25, 000 and below (37%)
- Female (47.2%), Male (52.8%)

We have examined our performance for different groups of students and have identified where the largest gaps exist in terms of access, success, progression and graduate outcomes.

#### 1.1 Higher education participation, household income, or socioeconomic status

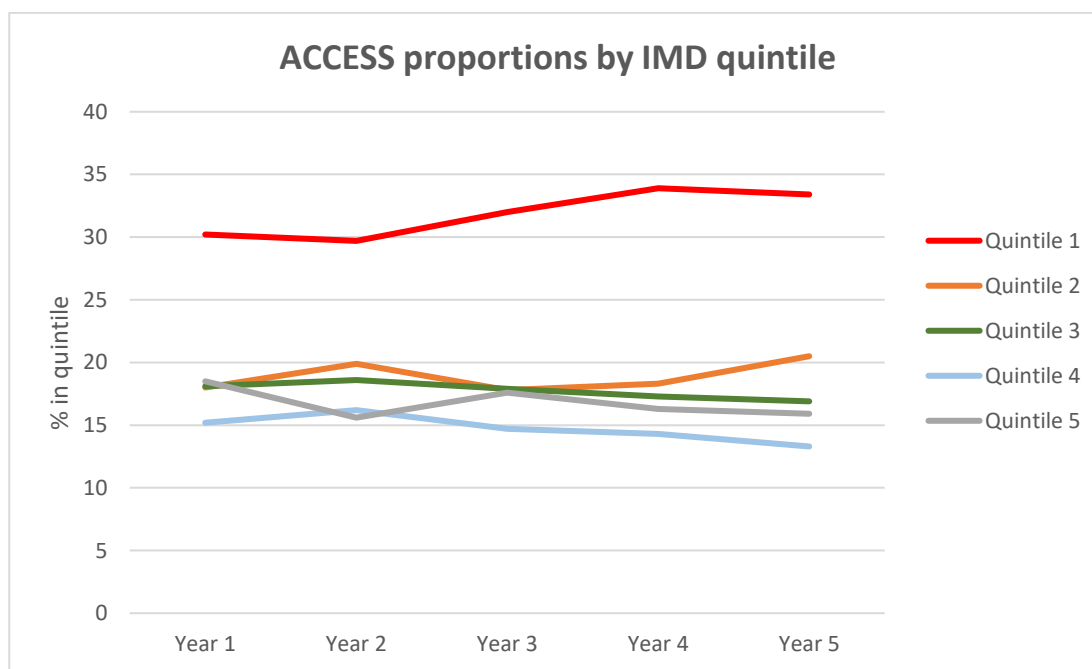
##### a) Access



**Figure 1.** UCAS data showing 18 year old offer rate by POLAR4 Quintile

Equality data provided by UCAS (see Figure 1) show our offer rates to applicants by POLAR4 quintile. These statistics do not take into account the subjects studied by applicants, but for the 2017-18 cycle we started to monitor more precisely the reasons for any rejection of candidates. Whilst we have only undertaken an initial analysis for the reasons for rejection, it would seem that the act of monitoring itself has gone some way to helping to equalise our offer rates in 2018. Figure 1 shows a rising offer rate over the five years shown and a closing of the gap in offer rates by quintile in the most recent year. We will continue to monitor reasons for rejection and use these to enhance the information given to prospective candidates so that they will be able more accurately to assess their chances of receiving an offer. Figure 1 also shows that POLAR4 Quintile 1 and 5 applicants were the most likely to receive offers (around 88% and 91% respectively). UCAS data nationally for medium tariff institutions shows that POLAR4 Quintile 1 students are the least likely to receive offers (around 79%). Thus, importantly for our access work, those POLAR4 Quintile 1 students who do apply to Aston University, are very likely to receive an offer.

In terms of enrolments, using the data provided by the Office for Students, we can see that Aston University has had a reduction in the proportion of students from POLAR 4 Q5 (statistically significant change over the 5 years) and a slight increase in students from Q3 and Q2, but progress is limited. Gaps between the proportions of students in the different quantiles in the general population of 18 year olds vs Aston University are mostly statistically significant and have been over the five years. We are slightly under-performing on admitting Q1 students relative to the sector (12% vs. 9.3%), but are admitting a greater proportion of Q2 and Q3 students.

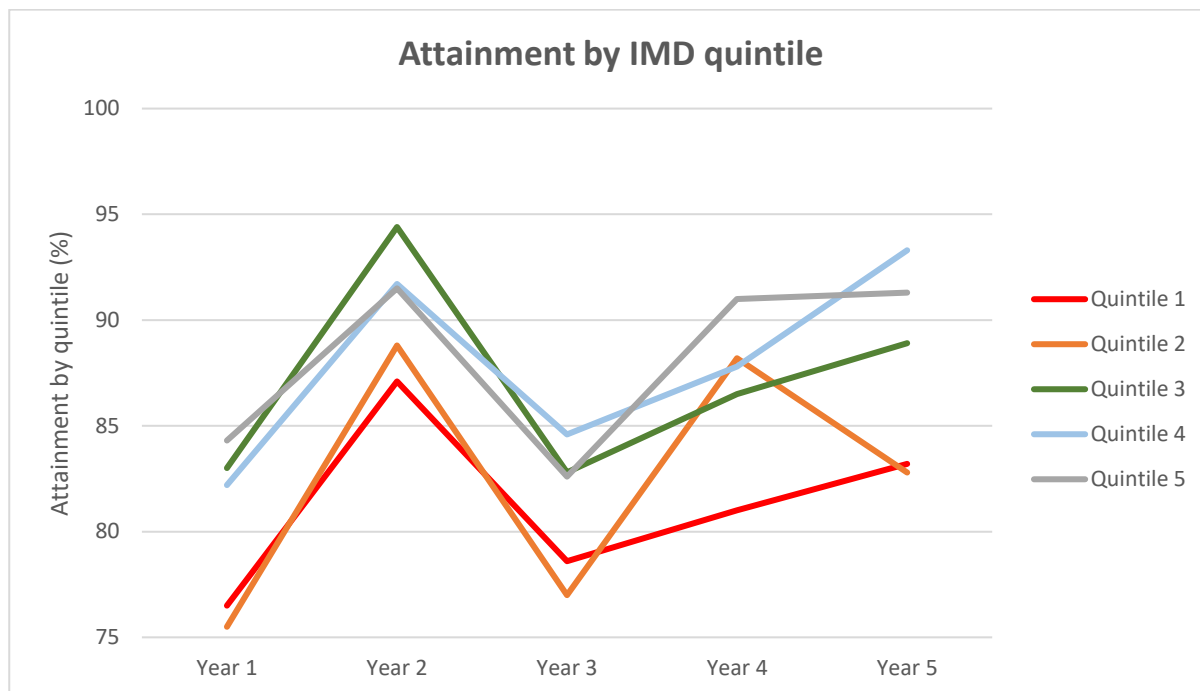


**Figure 2.** Access proportions by IMD quintile

In contrast, in terms of IMD quintile, Aston’s proportion of Q1 and Q2 students has grown over the past 5 years, although this change is not statistically significant. Aston recruits more IMD Q1 students than the sector average (22%) and its proportion is also growing faster than sector average (see Figure 2).

### b) Success

Our comparative continuation rates by POLAR4 Quintile do not differ significantly over the five years shown. Aston University's continuation rates are above sector average (around 6-7% above for Q1) and have been over the five years shown. In terms of IMD, continuation rates are also high in all quintiles. Gaps have not been consistently statistically significant over the 5 years. This is in contrast to the sector picture where students from lower quintiles have consistently worse continuation rates. Our attainment rates by POLAR 4 Quintile are shown in the figure below. The size of our gap between Q1 and Q5 students is smaller than the sector average.



**Figure 3.** Attainment by IMD Quintile (1<sup>st</sup> and 2:1 degree classifications)

Analysis by IMD Quintile paints a different picture (see Figure 3). Q1-Q2 attainment has been consistently worse than Q3-Q5 over the five years of data, although is only significantly worse in year five. This is in common with the sector average, although our gap is slightly smaller (8% vs. 12%).

### c) Progression to employment or further study

Our progression rates do not show statistically significant differences between the progression of students from the different POLAR quintiles to employment or further study over the five years of data. We generally exceed or equal sector average for all quintiles. In the most recent year, however, there was a 6% gap between Q1 and Q5 progression, with 6% lower outcomes for Q1 (70% vs. 76% respectively). Similarly, and similar to the sector average, for the IMD quintiles, our Q1-Q2 progression rates have been somewhat lower (although not significantly) than our rates for Q3-Q5 for the past 2 years (72% vs. 78%).

## 1.2 Black, Asian and minority ethnic students

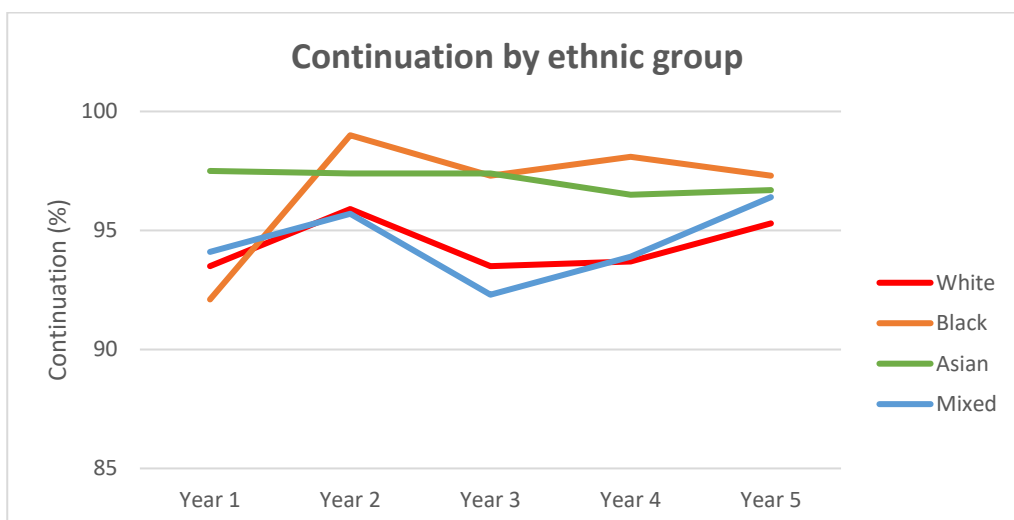
### a) Access

Equality data provided by UCAS allow us to examine our applicant offer rates by ethnicity. These do not take into account the subjects studied by applicants, but for the 2017-18 cycle we started to monitor more precisely the reasons for rejection of any candidates. We have carried out an initial analysis of the reasons for rejection and it would seem that the act of monitoring has gone some way to helping to equalise our offer rates amongst ethnic groups in 2018. Also, our offer rate has risen overall. In 2018, whilst White students were still more likely to receive an offer than Black or Asian students (around 94% vs. around 85%), the majority of this effect was accounted for by their predicted grades and subject applied for. Indeed, in 2018 the percentage difference between the actual offer rate and the average offer rate was similar for the different ethnic groups. Nationally, for medium tariff institutions, White students offer rates are around 83%, Asian students around 81% and Black students around 78%. Thus it would seem that we have a larger gap than average for offer rates, but much of it can be explained by predicted grades and subjects applied for. Our percentage point differences between our offer rate and our average offer rate for Black and Asian applicants is less than one, which for Black students in particular is more equal than the national picture. We plan to undertake further analysis to determine the remaining reasons for rejection and use it to enhance our information for prospective applicants to further reduce the gaps.

In terms of admissions, Aston University has seen a decline in the proportion of White students and an increase in the number of Black students. Compared to the sector, we admit fewer White students and more students from all the other ethnic groups, most notably Asian students (50% vs. 13% nationally). This is reflective of the local ethnically diverse demographic.

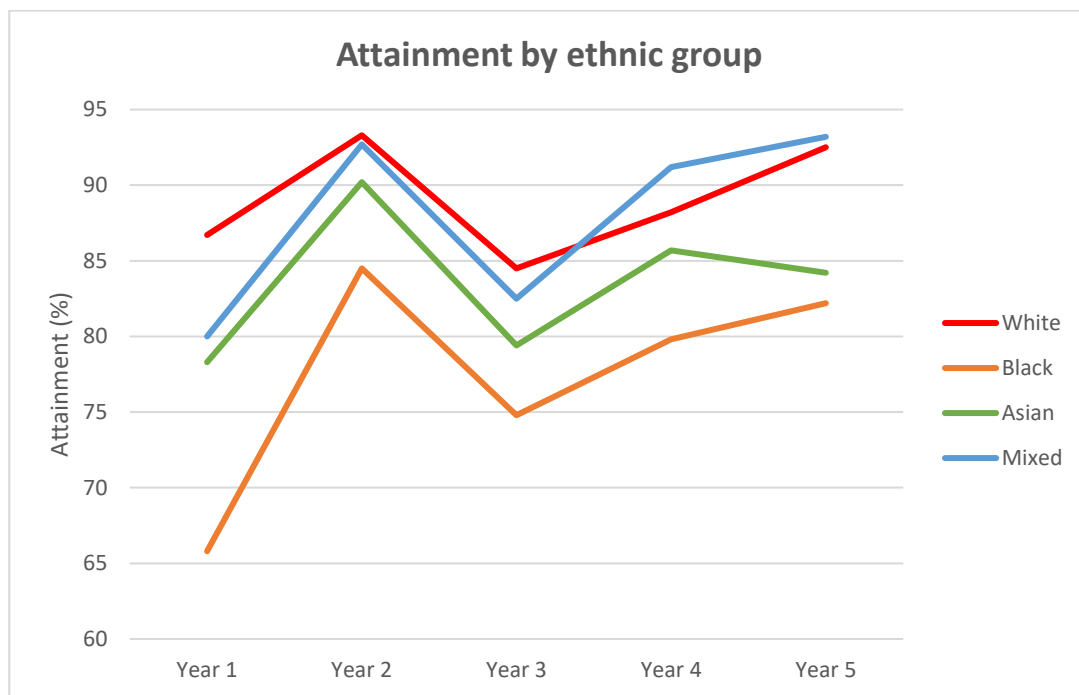
### b) Success

Our continuation rates at Aston University are relatively high. Over the past two years, Black and Asian students have been most likely to continue with their studies (see Figure 4). Continuation rates for most student groups have improved over the past five years. The gap between Black and Asian students has narrowed over the past five years. This is very different to the national picture where Black student continuation was only 85% (vs 97.3% at Aston).



**Figure 4.** Continuation by ethnic group

Aston University's attainment has been improving overall over the last five years, with some clear rises in year two. White attainment, however, remains significantly higher than Black attainment (see Figure 5). Compared to the national picture our attainment gap is relatively small, in particular for Black students (the sector average is 59% for Black students vs. 80% White).



**Figure 5.** Attainment by ethnic group

*c) Progression to employment or further study*

Over the past three years, progression to employment or further study has been steadily improving for Black students, but decreasing for Asian students. In year 4 of the OfS data, the progression of Asian students marginally exceeded that of White students (77% vs. 76%), a pattern also shown in year 3. However, in year 5 (the most recent year) White student progression exceeded that of both Asian and Black students (80% vs. 73% and 75% respectively). These gaps are not statistically significant and compared to sector averages we are producing higher progression rates for all groups.

**1.3 Mature students**

*a) Access*

We have seen a decline in the proportion of mature students studying at Aston over the past five years according to the HESA data. Internal data suggest that the absolute numbers of undergraduate mature students have held steady or even increased. We are still, however, well below sector average in terms of our proportions of mature students (nationally around 27%). Aston University is more suited to students aged 18-21 years because of its makeup of degree programmes (including a placement year) and modes of study (mainly full time).

*b) Success*

Continuation in mature students at Aston is lower than for young students (88% vs. 97%) although not significantly so. This gap widened in year five. Sector wide, the gap is similar in size (85% vs. 93%) but the level of absolute performance is lower. Attainment of mature students at Aston is also lower than that of young students (88% vs. 76%). Sector-wide the gap is 80% vs. 70%.



### *c) Progression to employment or further study*

Mature students at Aston achieve higher progression outcomes than young students (87% vs. 74%). Whilst this pattern is similar across the sector, Aston's gap is larger. The gap was not statistically significant in year five.

## **1.4 Disabled students**

### *a) Access*

The proportion of students declaring a disability at Aston has been growing gradually (now 8%) but not as quickly as sector averages and we are below the sector average. Our fastest growing proportion of disabled students have mental health issues (2.1%) and our largest subtype have cognitive and learning difficulties (3.1%). This pattern is similar to the sector average.

### *b) Success*

Continuation rates amongst disabled students at Aston are relatively high (93%) and not significantly different from their non-disabled counterparts (97%). In year five there were no statistically significant differences between the different subtypes of disability listed. Nationally, the continuation gap is statistically significant. Smaller numbers may preclude the difference being significant at Aston. There were no statistically significant differences in attainment between disabled and non-disabled students in the five years indicated and no consistently significant differences between the subtypes.

### *c) Progression to employment or further study*

Similar numbers of disabled students progressed to employment or further study as their non-disabled counterparts and this did not differ according to disability subtype.

## **1.5 Care leavers**

### *a) Access*

The proportion of students who are care leavers has remained at relatively similar levels for the past five years. As at the 2017-18 academic year, 0.4% (31 students) of the total home undergraduate student population were care leavers. Care leavers at Aston are awarded the Aston Care Leavers Scholarship in each year of study. Care leavers are also prioritised for the Aston Support Fund should they find themselves in financial difficulty.

### *b) Success*

Non-continuation rates for care leavers have fluctuated over the course of the past five years. As at 2016-17, care leavers had a continuation rate of approximately 83%. This has increased to 85% as at the 2017-18 academic year. The attainment of higher degree classifications amongst care leavers has tended to vary over the course of the last five years, as you might expect with such small numbers. In the course of the past two academic years, approximately 80% of care leavers who obtained an honours degree obtained a higher degree classification. This is 7% below the higher degree attainment rate of the total undergraduate population at Aston, but in line with the sector average.

### *c) Progression to employment or further study*

Where there is known data relating to progression, the majority of care leavers do go on to full-time work or further study. This data set, however, is limited by a number of unknown or refused DLHE responses amongst this cohort across the years under review.

## 1.6 Intersections of disadvantage

### a) *Interaction of IMD with ethnicity*

In terms of access, our biggest intersectional group is BAME and mixed ethnicity students from the two lower IMD quintiles (46% of our students). White students from the lowest two IMD quintiles represent only around 8% of our population. In contrast, within the Q3-Q5 quintiles, White and BAME students are approximately equally represented. It would, therefore, appear that White students in the Q1-Q2 quintiles may be underrepresented. This picture is quite different from the sector average in many ways and reflects the demographic in the Birmingham area. Birmingham City Council's community cohesion strategy identifies that 68.9% of the school population overall is BAME, compared to 31% nationally.

In terms of continuation, these four groups of students are also quite different; White IMD Q1-Q2 students have lower continuation rates than the other three groups. In terms of sector averages, BAME Q1-Q2 students also have slightly lower continuation rates. There are no differential patterns of attainment for this interaction that have not already been covered above. In terms of progression to employment, as above, White students have higher rates. This difference is driven mainly by White students in Q3-5 quintiles.

### b) *Interaction of POLAR4 with ethnicity*

In terms of access, POLAR4 Q3-5 BAME students is our biggest group (54%) with BAME students from POLAR Q1 being the smallest group. White students from the lowest two POLAR quintiles represent only around 8%. White students are underrepresented in both Q1-Q2 and Q3-Q5 quintiles. As above, this pattern is quite different from the sector average.

In terms of continuation rates, in contrast to sector averages, there were no statistically significant gaps in year five between the four groups. As detailed above, attainment was higher in White students (this was regardless of POLAR4 quintile, although the gap in attainment by quintile group was larger in White students than BAME students). Progression to employment was highest in Q3-5 White students (80%), but not significantly so.

### c) *Interaction of IMD and sex*

There are no noticeable inequalities between IMD and sex in terms of access – we admit roughly 25% from each of the four groups. Q1-Q2 males have the lowest continuation rates, but not significantly lower than any other group. In terms of attainment, Q1-Q2 males have the lowest rates, but differ significantly only from Q3-Q5 females. Q1-Q2 males also have the lowest rates of progression to employment or further study (70% vs. 78% for Q3-5 males) although these differences are not statistically significant.

### d) *Interaction of POLAR4 and sex*

We have admitted similar proportions of males and females from POLAR4 Q1-Q2 and continuation rates of the groups are similar. Attainment rates are lowest in Q1-Q2 males, but not significantly lower (year five). Progression is also lowest in this group, but not significantly so (year five).

## 1.7 Other groups who experience barriers in higher education

Approximately 4% of all home undergraduate new entrants declare themselves as being Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or other (LGBTQ+). The continuation rates of these students is slightly lower than those students who are declared as heterosexual (by approximately 4% in the most recent two academic years). These data are reliant on students' self-declaration so the University does recognise there may be a larger group of students who identify in this category and choose not to declare this.



Approximately 1% of all home undergraduate students are carers or students from a Romany gypsy or traveller community, or children from a military family. We have analysed continuation data over the course of three years and have not found there to be a lower level of continuation amongst students who identify as carers. Continuation rates for carers were slightly higher than for non-carers across all three years under review. Carer data have only been collected extensively since 2014-15.

The limits to the amount of data available to the University in relation to attainment and graduate outcomes for the wider target group make it difficult to make any meaningful conclusions at this stage. The University is committed to monitoring this more closely over the next three years in order to identify any gaps should they exist, and will put in place a relevant action plan to address these gaps.

## **2. Strategic aims and objectives**

Aston University's overall 2018–2023 strategy communicates the ambition, objectives and priorities for the University for the next four years. The University strategy focuses on its key beneficiary groups: students, business and the professions, and region and society. The University's strategic approach is to increase and improve access to Aston University and Higher Education more widely, particularly for those coming from the local community, in order that we can create employable graduates who will support our region to thrive. We believe in equality of opportunity for all students, regardless of their background or circumstance, and are experienced in the delivery of this ethos due to the nature of the student demographic at Aston University.

The University recognises its strength in attracting a large proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, as well as a diverse mix of students from different Office for Student key performance measure groups. One of the key challenges for Aston University, identified by internal, national and HESA data, is to increase the number of mature learners accessing higher education at undergraduate level. The University strategy is focused on nurturing a talent pipeline across its current academic portfolio through its traditional undergraduate degree programmes. We firmly believe, however, that it is “getting on” not just “getting in” that matters. It is therefore important to us that students access degree programmes that provide them with a positive future. With this in mind we have built on our Degree Apprenticeship programmes in collaboration with a range of employers to increase the numbers of mature students via this route. We are also strengthening the pipeline of Further Education (FE) partners via our recently awarded Institute of Technology. The University was the first in the country to graduate a cohort of degree apprentices in 2018; we do not believe that traditional undergraduate learning routes are the only way to achieve a degree.

For younger students too, employment prospects are critical. The University is strongly committed to ensuring that undergraduate students take part in work placement opportunities as our own research (Jones, Green & Higson, 2015) shows that work placements improve degree attainment. As well as offering placements or work experience in all of our degree programmes, in order to ensure that new degree programmes are aligned with our beneficiary groups as outlined in the 2018-2023 strategy, a process has been developed that ensures the academic proposer has considered a broad remit of influencers. These include the labour market and employer demand for both placement opportunities and graduate jobs and more broadly potential labour market or policy changes that could be impactful and influential. This approach ensures we are providing courses that meet the needs of a changing economy both inside and outside the region, identifying skills gaps and using intelligence from the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) and the wider skills agenda to inform decision making.

Courses are ‘fit for purpose’ with employer input and respond to the needs for both hard and soft skills, which in turn should lead to more graduates securing a positive destination in a graduate job or further study. In addition, our commitment to graduate-level employment is underlined by our investment to ensure the staffing resource in this area matches the student level need, as well as in Placement Scholarships to ensure any students who are taking unpaid or overseas placements, or come from low income households, are financially supported throughout their placement year.

Aston's retention and employability record remains amongst the best in the country for students from widening participation or diverse backgrounds. We are, however, continuing to set ourselves ambitious targets for retention and employability because we see this as the best way to build on Aston's expertise in these areas and provide students, particularly from under-represented groups, with a strong start in their professional life.

Aston will be focussing its Access and Participation Plan on ensuring that it continue to attract a diverse range of students at access, with particular emphasis on students from POLAR4 Quintile 1. It will also focus its efforts on addressing its identified gaps at continuation and progression, particularly for all identified student groups (related to gaps in this area) in order to ensure outcomes for all students are equal. At Aston University our level of ambition is bold and focussed on continuous improvements where we are already reducing gaps and improving overall performance, as well as continuing the interventions from our extensive outreach portfolio which shows impact linked to aspiration and attainment. The University is also committed to new outreach work, in line with the guidance issued by OfS, which includes the introduction of progressive two year pathway programmes aligned to each Aston academic School. Aston University's innovative 40% widening participation Medical School was also created to ensure students from the local demographic who are from widening participation backgrounds are able to access the medical profession. Aston works in some of the most deprived communities in the UK, 86% of all schools involved in our outreach interventions have an IMD score of 60% or more. At a granular level, the majority of students we work with live in a neighbourhood which has an IMD score of 73%.

## **2.1 Target groups**

Aston University has carefully completed a robust self-assessment from a number of data sources including the data set provided by the Office for Students. Using these data sources we have identified our target groups.

Aston University will be targeting the following groups at Access:

- Students from POLAR 4 Quintile 1
- Mature students
- Disabled Students
- Care Leavers

Aston University will be targeting the following groups at Success:

- All students from IMD Quintile 1 and Quintile 2
- BAME students at attainment
- Mature students

Aston University will be targeting the following groups at Progression:

- BAME Students
- Students from POLAR 4 Quintile 1

## 2.2 Aims and objectives

Aston University's aims and objectives and the timescales we are working towards are summarised in the table below:

Current situation	Target	Interventions	Achieved by
<b>Access</b>			
9.3% POLAR4 Q1	Increase by 2% each year until 2023, then by 1% until 2025	New scholarships Raising aspirations Outreach interventions Contextualised Offer Scheme	2025
8% Mature	Increase by 0.64% per year until 2025	New scholarships Degree Apprenticeship specific outreach	2025
8.4% Disabled	Increase by 2% each year until 2023, then by 1% until 2025	Better representation in marketing A new project around declaration	2025
0.4% Care Leavers	Increase by five care leavers per year until 2025	Scholarships Outreach interventions	2025
<b>Success</b>			
8% IMD Q1/2 vs. Q3-5 attainment gap	Reduce gap by 1% each year until 2025	Learning Development Centre Household income based scholarships	2025
10% Black vs White attainment gap  8% Asian vs. White attainment gap	Reduce the gaps between BAME and white students at attainment by 1% each year until 2025	Learning Development Centre Encouragement to undertake placement year Equality monitoring of modules	2025
<b>Progression</b>			
6% progression gap between POLAR Q1 vs Q5	Improve Q1 student progression by 1% each year until 2025	Placement year Placement Scholarship Learning Development Centre	2025
7% progression gap for BAME	Increase BAME students progressing to further education or graduate level employment by 3% by 2025	Supporting BAME students to take placement year	2025

## 3. Strategic measures

### 3.1 Whole provider strategic approach

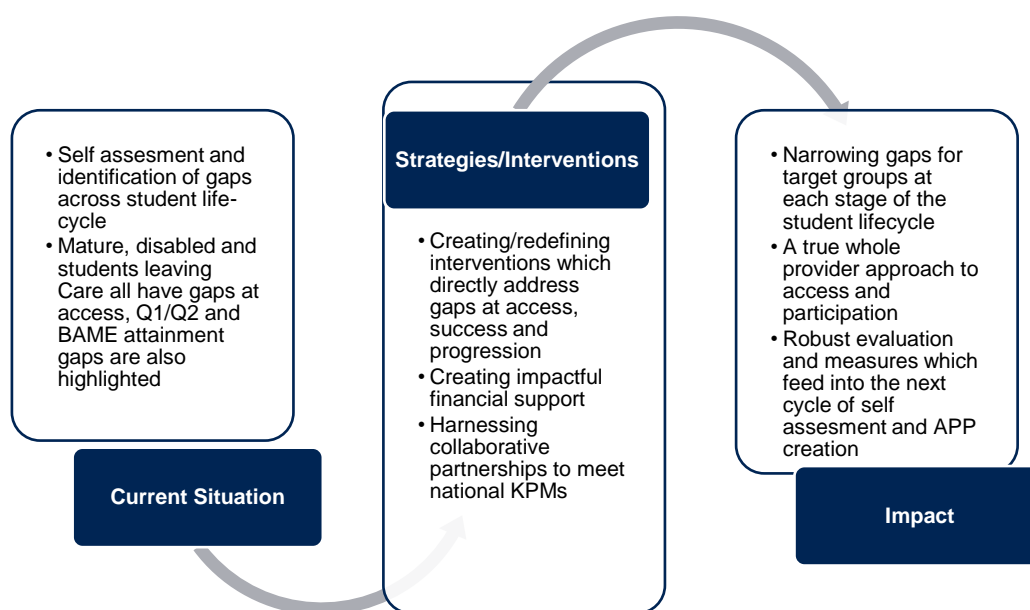
#### Overview

Aston University has a longstanding commitment to widening access and participation for its students, which has ensured the University has had a whole provider approach to this work for some years. To ensure continuous improvement, the University has put a number of processes in place. This includes:

- Creating a cross organisational widening participation forum which includes staff from all relevant departments and at all levels, including the Students' Union, to monitor progress against targets, conduct operational evaluation and ensure best practice from the sector and the institution can be embedded effectively
- Setting up a Senior Strategy Group to shape the University approach to access and participation which meets monthly to ensure that monitoring and evaluation is conducted throughout the year
- Introducing a monitoring and evaluation communication chain for stakeholder such as the Students' Union, Council and Senate

- Implementing a compulsory operational theory of change for widening participation interventions throughout the student lifecycle which will feed into the University wide strategic model
- Ensuring continuation and attainment targets are included in all University Annual and Periodic Reviews
- Creating a quarterly report of progress against targets which will be presented at the University Learning and Teaching Committee, Programme Approval Steering Committee, and at University Executive Committee and the Senate

Aston University's Theory of Change can be summarised by the chart below. The University's Theory of Change model focuses on the University's overall strategic approach to interventions and impact. Each widening participation and continuation intervention at Aston University will be required to have a logic chain or theory of change model attached to it. This will allow for more robust planning of interventions and evaluation against key aims and milestones linked to impact.



### 3.2 Alignment with other strategies

Aston University's 2018-2023 strategy is framed around three beneficiary groups: students; business and the professions; and our region and society. This Access and Participation Plan, therefore, aligns perfectly with the University strategy. For the student beneficiaries, one of the key outcomes is 'high rates of employment in desirable jobs after graduation'; this aligns well with the OfS' progression measure. We plan to do this – in part - by also serving our second beneficiary group - business and the professions – by creating the type of graduates that employers need. For the region and society beneficiary group, one of our key outcomes is 'to create educational opportunities for the students of our region, regardless of their background'. This also aligns perfectly with the OfS access measures.

Aston University also signed up to the Athena Swan charter in 2009 for promoting diversity in education and currently holds an institutional silver award. Athena Swan initiatives throughout the University align well with the OfS objectives of equality and take a more in depth look at intersectionality and trying to achieve a better gender balance in different degree programmes. Our work with Athena Swan provided a framework to look closely at gender balance in admissions at Programme level and also allows us to monitor attainment gaps closely and to look for within-subject area discrepancies. Engagement with equality charters supports timely identification of equality issues and implementation of effective interventions. So, we understand, for example, that although Aston University has a good gender balance overall, women are disproportionately represented in Life and Health Sciences, whilst men are disproportionately represented in Engineering. Student recruitment initiatives seek to rebalance these disparities. We are also planning to submit a Race

Equality Charter application and this will involve further detailed analysis of race attainment gaps, as well as an evaluation of the inclusivity of our curricula.

Aston's teaching, learning and assessment strategy is also aligned well to the OfS key performance indicators. We plan to increase the number of students on Degree Apprenticeships, for example, which will lead to better outcomes for our students, and further diversify our student demographic. We also plan to prioritise active collaborative learning in order to enhance learning and reflect real workplace situations, leading to better progression and better continuation for students. The Access and Participation Plan has also been a key driver in the University's contextualised admissions strategy, as well as the University's five year recruitment plan.

The University has ensured its aims and objectives from the 2020 Access and Participation Plan have been aligned and embedded in its other strategies including its Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy. In order to assess Aston's Access and Participation Plan in accordance with equality and diversity policy, the University conducts an independent impact assessment each year.

The Access and Participation Plan is also written in conjunction with the Teaching, Learning and Assessment Strategy, Employability Strategy, Recruitment Strategy and Admissions Policy. During the five year cycle of the Access and Participation Plan, Aston will continue to ensure its commitment to narrowing its identified gaps are aligned in all relevant strategies.

### **3.3 Strategic measures**

#### *a) Access*

At access all interventions will be targeted to ensure they directly meet the demographics outlined in our target groups over the period outlined in the targets and milestones section of this plan. We will be creating logic chains and evaluation frameworks for all interventions during the summer in 2019 ready for implementation in 2020, to help us to monitor the progress of these for the duration of this plan.

Our focus at access will be to create sustained, impactful and progressive interventions from primary age to pre-entry to higher education. These will support a holistic approach to removing barriers at access which will include:

- Aspiration raising primary work and attainment raising work with targeted schools and students from POLAR4 Q1 areas
- Subject specific pathways
- Collaborative work with the Aimhigher consortia, LACES, Birmingham Virtual School, The Birmingham Repertory Theatre and the Titan Education Partnership
- Care leaver and carer specific events
- Maths coaching
- GCSE tutoring with The Access Project
- Working closely to raise attainment with Aston University Engineering Academy, the 14-19 school we sponsor

The University will also be in its second year of running a national contextualised offer scheme which provides offer holders with a contextualised offer, additional study skills support, and revision interventions in the lead up to their level three examinations. The University also supports a number of external fora which support community engagement through board membership such as Citizens UK Birmingham, and Titan Education Partnership.

In 2020, our Pathway to Healthcare programme will continue positively to impact at least one hundred learners per annum from targeted schools and colleges by providing UCAS personal statement writing workshops, interview and assessment preparation and intensive revision boot camps to improve academic attainment throughout years twelve and thirteen. The pathway will continue its mission to empower

students who are considering studying healthcare at university to confidently make decisions about their progression into Higher Education. From this programme, some students will progress to the first year of MBChB at Aston Medical School, whilst the remainder will have been prepared for applications to other medical schools or to related science programmes of study at Aston or other institutions. The University will ring-fence 40 places on the MBChB programme for students from a widening participation background. In 2020 we will be continuing the Keith Bradshaw Introduction to Healthcare Programme which was created in 2019 to work with students from years eight-ten and will positively impact at least 800 learners per annum through interactive workshops in schools and campus experience days at Aston University.

Another challenge for Aston University at access is to increase the number of students declaring a registered disability accessing higher education. We will be building on previous work in this area to ensure that our marketing materials have a higher profile visual representation of this cohort of students. We have made great strides on gender and BAME diversity, but recognise that there is still work to do on disability representation. This work will start in September 2019 and will be an ongoing live project.

We will also be increasing the number of case studies and student voice representation involving learners from target groups including, but not limited to, students with a registered disability and mature learners. We will also provide additional support for students to become student ambassadors alongside their first year of study. This will take place in September 2019 to coincide the start of the new student ambassador scheme running at Aston University and will be an ongoing project.

Aston University has an ambition to increase the number of care leavers at the University by five learners year on year. We are a key member of the West Midlands Care Leavers Network. The network enables staff from the region to share good practice in this area. Aston already works with local care leaver/LACES support teams in the region to organise campus visit days for groups of students in care. We also host networking/information events on campus for carers and 'virtual school' coordinators to inform them of the support available from Aston and other Universities.

The University will also be investing in a number of new scholarships aimed at targets groups, identified either by the university or the OfS (mature learners, care leavers, refugees, children from military families and students from low household incomes) outlined in the table below and starting in September 2020:

Scholarship	Amount
Aston Achievement Scholarship (BBB+ for students with a household income of £42, 875 and below)	£500 for year 1 or foundation year
Aston Aspiration Scholarship (for students with a household income of £42, 875 and below)	£500 for year 2
Mature Adult Learners	£500 for each year of study (excluding the placement year)
Care Leavers (extended to refugees, children from military families)	£1,250 for each year of study
Placement year scholarship (for students with a household income of £42, 875 and below, unpaid or overseas placements)	£1,250 for placement year
Aston Extra (for students with a household income of £42, 875 and below)	£50 for each year of study (excluding the placement year)

Aston University will continue to offer a first year scholarship based on achievement and household income. Our evaluation of scholarship data has suggested that as little as £500 a year can aid the continuation of students from households with income below around £42k. The achievement requirements for this scholarship remain at BBB+ at A-level (or equivalent – as it was for 2019 entrants) to encompass more students than did our scholarship offering in 2018 (which required AAB+). We believe that setting a minimum achievement requirement encourages students to work hard for their A levels and also rewards their hard work. Employers and placement providers often look at students' A level qualifications before offering employment so it is important that students do their best. Because evidence shows that these scholarships aid continuation, we have also extended this scholarship to students in Year 2 but called this the Aston



Aspiration Scholarship. In addition, we have removed the achievement requirements in Year 2 – instead all students with household incomes of around £42k and below will be awarded this scholarship as a reward for progressing into Year 2 and to support them through Year 2.

We have chosen to maintain our scholarship for the placement year for students with a household income of £42k and below, or unpaid or overseas placements. Our research shows that students who complete placements have superior career outcomes (e.g. Moores & Reddy, 2012) as well as better final year performance (e.g. Jones, Green & Higson, 2017). Attainment gaps are also reduced in those students who take placements (Moores, Birdi & Higson, 2017).

We have not previously offered a scholarship for mature students so have no statistical evaluation of these, but recognise that mature learners often have more financial (and other) responsibilities which may make effective study more challenging. Although the gap in continuation rates between younger and mature students at Aston University is not statistically significant, in recognition of our desire to improve continuation rates in mature learners, we propose this mature learners' scholarship. We also propose to continue our care leavers' scholarship and extend it to include refugees and children from military families. We are not able to statistically evaluate the effects of these scholarships so far, because our numbers from these groups are too small to do so.

Aston University is committed to supporting its students through financial support, but is mindful of the Augar Report released in May 2019, and ongoing Government Review of Post-18 Education and Funding. The University will reserve the right to amend its scholarship policy, for example if there is a reduction in fees or changes to the maintenance system.

Aston has identified there are specific barriers to students who may not wish to declare themselves as LGBTQ+. Whilst the University accepts that this is a personal student choice, the University will also be seeking to ensure that students understand more clearly that declarations to the University will provide access to targeted support mechanisms.

The University has a large and thriving LGBTQ+ student society who have been instrumental in shaping support mechanisms and ensuring students are aware where they can seek specific support should they need it. The University has gender inclusive toilets in its brand new Students' Union building and Aston's Gender Identity policy ensures students and staff from a transgender or non-binary background are able to thrive on campus. Aston also has an LGBTQ+ mentoring scheme available to students. The scheme matches students who identify as LGBTQ+ with members of staff who also identify in this way to provide additional support around identity in the workplace.

As part of its collaborative work with Aimhigher, Aston University will be working closely with other regional institutions to increase the number of students from POLAR 4 Quintile 1 accessing services to support destinations into post 16 education. We are committed to the longstanding partnership activity in the West Midlands region. Our evidence from both our APP funded work and our NCOP activity shows that increased engagement leads to increased HE participation and thus will contribute to the sector wide ambition to reduce the gap between POLAR 4 Quintile 5 and Quintile 1.

The consortia will provide a progressive and integrated programme of support and advice, to widen participation in higher education at sector level. Post-16, whilst the intensive face to face work of the partnership will cease, we will continue a programme of communication and signposting to enable students to engage with the programmes and activities offered by our partner higher education institutions and neighbouring consortia as part of their recruitment activity. In delivering the programme we will engage with parents and guardians, schools and other influencers. Our activity will seek to complement any activity funded by the Office for Students such as the NCOP, but also sustain proven activity subject to resource available.

## *b) Success*

To address the gaps between IMD Q1/Q2 and Q5, and BAME and non BAME students at Aston, the University will be continuing with a number of interventions which the University has evidenced as having a tangible impact on continuation and attainment. These include:

- Aston's Peer Mentoring project
- The Learning Development Centre – ensuring students are aware of the support it can provide throughout their student lifecycle
- Increasing Personal Tutor support – we are building on our personal tutor system in relation to the implementation of the learner analytics system which targets students specifically at the continuation and progression stages of the student lifecycle
- Flexible learning support to off-campus students, in particular those studying Degree Apprenticeships
- Providing high quality CPD to academic staff
- Placement year and industry experience

In relation to BAME attainment specifically, Aston University and Aston University Students' Union were both heavily involved in the joint Universities UK-NUS report on closing the BAME attainment gap, published in May 2019, with the Vice-Chancellor sitting on the advisory group for the project, and subsequently pledging support to the framework developed during this project to tackle the BAME attainment gap.

The University will also be continuing to use its Attendance Monitoring software which allows students who are at risk of withdrawal to be flagged and supported much earlier. The University has been implementing its Learner Analytics Project since 2018-19 and this will continue to be rolled out to new first year students on an annual basis for the next three to four years until all students have access to their own data. Personal tutors use the system to help support their students and identify struggling students before it is too late.

Aston will also be further developing its approach to its teaching and assessment methods to increase further active collaborative learning and decreasing its didactic lectures. This will involve ensuring default teaching methods will be about adopting an active and collaborative learning relationship between staff and students in studio-like settings. This work is scheduled to begin in September 2019 with all findings incorporated by September 2020. The University has already been using this teaching practice successfully in its Centre for Learning, Innovation and Professional Practice (CLIPP) for the last eight years, as well as in the School of Engineering and on the Law programme. Active collaborative learning prepares students for work which is team-based, technology rich, flexible in nature and globally connected.

## *c) Progression*

To ensure the University narrows its gap between BAME and non-BAME groups progressing to further education or graduate level employment the University will be continuing to implement the findings from its research-informed Differential Graduate Employability Outcomes Project.

The focus of this HEFCE/OfS funded project was to level the playing field for widening participation students, particularly those from low socio-economic status backgrounds, disabled students and black and minority ethnic students. These students are historically less likely to take up work placements which in turn means they are less likely to be employed in graduate level employment or even at all. Aston worked collaboratively with four other institutions to create two interventions to narrow the gaps between BAME and non BAME students taking up placements. The interventions were:

**Talent bank:** a placement matching service, targeting students who had disengaged from 'normal' placement services, supported by targeted support. This successful initiative, fast-growing in the years before the project, was focused on year-long placements;

**Professional mentoring:** this scheme of matching business professionals with students had only previously operated within Aston Business School, so this project enabled this to be widened. Mentors supported students into year-long placements.

Our research has repeatedly shown that students engaging in work placements are more likely to be in graduate level employment and less likely to be unemployed than those who did not (e.g. Jones, Green & Higson, 2015; Moores & Reddy, 2012). Research at Aston University has also shown the moderating impact of work placements on differential degree outcomes for BAME students (Moores, Birdi & Higson, 2017).

Data from partner institutions, however, has shown that BAME students are 10% less likely to take a placement than White students, thereby reducing their likelihoods of good employment outcomes. So by focusing this project on increasing the take-up of placements, partners aimed to impact the longer-term outcome of increasing graduate-level employment.

The University will also be creating a new Graduate Attributes Framework during 2019. The Framework will support the development of a shared dialogue between Aston, our students, employers and the community developing a shared understanding of what an “Aston Graduate” is, and describing the skills and capabilities we enable students to develop above and beyond their specific course discipline.

The Framework will directly support the embedding of employability, enterprise and cultural intelligence across learning and teaching activities, in turn driving the delivery of the 80% Graduate Outcomes key performance measures (internal) and supporting our mission to develop employable, global graduates who will make a valuable contribution to society. Careers+Placements are also working closely with employers who have diversity and inclusion high on their agenda. With such a diverse student base at Aston, we are working on bespoke, innovative and tailored initiatives to reach target groups of students and track the success of these in increasing applications and appointments. This supports both the strategic goals of employers and also helps our students into employment.

For example, leading financial services firm, Mazars would like to address the imbalance of female to male applications, particularly those from BAME groups. We are currently developing plans to increase awareness of the variety of careers and roles available and highlight some of the stories of women working there, which will be shared via a targeted Instagram campaign. A Q&A panel is then scheduled to take place giving students the opportunity to engage with women from the organisation to help “bust myths” and break down perceived barriers to application. These activities will be complemented by a further skills session and mentoring opportunities to give a well-rounded approach to engagement, which will be tracked and monitored at all stages to consider the impact of the approach. Careers+Placements are also working with the Royal Ballet and Reed to look at addressing diversity challenges within their organisations.

### **3.4 Student consultation**

We have ensured that students are consulted throughout the process of creating our Access and Participation Plan. This has involved working closely with the Students’ Union to provide representation on the University-wide Widening Participation Forum and a separate student consultation with a smaller group of sabbatical officers who reflected our diverse student cohort (this group included Romany gypsy /traveller communities, Muslim females, BAME LGBTQ+ males). Any suggestions from these forums were incorporated in the support package offered to students.

The Students’ Union have also been part of the governance process and have attended key Senior Strategy Group Meetings. The Senior Strategy Group will feedback to students on progress against targets via the Student Senate and monthly Widening Participation Forum meetings. From 2019 there will be training for the nominated Sabbatical Officers to understand the Access and Participation process, cycle and to ensure there is student input towards the annual Impact Reports.

The President of Aston University’s Students’ Union has provided the following statement for inclusion in the University’s Access and Participation Plan:

*“We have relished the opportunity to be involved in the creation of Aston University’s Access and Participation Plan. The widening participation work the University does is vital to helping the student body thrive which is particularly important given how many students are positively affected by this work, both from an early school age right through to when they then become students and graduates. With almost half of the student union membership living locally – we know this makes a huge difference.*

*Being part of the Access and Participation process including the widening participation forum, evaluation feedback group and senior strategy group has been an interesting part of being a student officer at Aston and has helped the Students’ Union understand the challenges and opportunities that can come from this work.”*  
Student Union President 2018-19

### **3.5 Evaluation strategy**

We have completed the self-assessment evaluation spreadsheet provided by the Office for Students and we score highly on “learning from evaluation”, consistently using high quality evaluation results to improve our practice and inform future interventions. Not all of our evaluations, however, are as high quality as we would like and, therefore, some remain unused.

We will continue to utilise our Widening Participation Forum to discuss and reflect upon our aims, ambitions and targets as well as our evaluation strategies and for results to feed into future strategies (on an annual basis). In addition, we will enhance the utility of this forum by securing increased student engagement in the forum and in wider discussions. We also intend to consolidate our evaluation outcome measures into fewer measures so that we can directly compare the success of different types of interventions aimed at our specified targets so that we can calculate the success and impact of each. This will be particularly important in areas where we are investing heavily. We will also continue the move to using more objective measures of change in e.g. attrition, attainment etc. where appropriate, rather than questions measuring attitudes and feelings and use these findings to improve existing and committed-to interventions, or create new ones which meet our strategic aims more effectively.

We have now been collecting data in HEAT for two years. We will continue to use HEAT to track the impact of our interventions and will develop expertise in analysing the data. As analyses of our various interventions become available we will share results internally and externally and use them to inform future interventions.

We have recently undertaken an analysis of the impact of financial scholarships awarded by Aston University from 2013-2017. We used an adaptation of the OfS financial support evaluation toolkit for this, simplifying some variables to increase statistical power. Six comparison groups for the scholarship measure were created (based on household income level and whether or not any scholarship was awarded in the first year) and we analysed the effect of first year scholarships only:

1. >£42k household income no scholarship (reference group\*)
2. >£42K household income + scholarship
3. £25-£42K household income no scholarship
4. £25-£42K household income + scholarship
5. <£25K household income no scholarship
6. <£25K household income + scholarship

Our results showed that whether or not a scholarship was awarded to those students from households with >£42k household income made no difference to continuation rates. In contrast, those in the £25-£42k or the <£25k groups who received a scholarship were equally likely as those in the >£42k group to continue, whereas those without a scholarship were statistically significantly less likely to continue. We have had varying levels of first year scholarships over the years. Further analysis showed that as little as £500 could be beneficial, in particular to those from households with the lowest income levels. We have used this information to develop our latest scholarship proposals as already detailed in section 3.3. Going forward, we will continue to evaluate the success of the first year scholarships using continuation data and the binary logistic regression method recommended in the OfS toolkit. It is more difficult to evaluate the effectiveness

of placement scholarships themselves, except for determining whether or not more people go on placement, but we know that if a greater proportion of students go on placement then our progression rates will improve.

### **3.6 Monitoring progress against delivery of the plan**

Aston University takes the monitoring of its Access and Participation plan very seriously. The Provost and Deputy Vice-Chancellor is responsible for monitoring at an executive level, with the Associate Pro Vice Chancellor responsible for evaluation for the University.

If progress against targets is worsening, this will be identified as part of Aston's quarterly monitoring review and specific and targeted interventions will be put in place and overseen by a Senior Strategy Group member to ensure all appropriate action is taken.

The University will monitor progress against delivery of its plan by:

- Updating quarterly at the cross-university Widening Participation Forum
- Ensuring any targets related to success and progression are reported on in Learning, Teaching and Assessment Committee
- Provide quarterly updates to Senate and Council as part of the University's governance process
- Provide monthly updates to the University Executive in the form of a monthly report
- Provide updates to the Students' Union via the Student Council

The University will also reserve the right to change the delivery and support mechanisms in place for Access and Participation, should there be a change to the fee structure for higher education students studying in England.

### **4. Provision of information to students**

The University will ensure all information on fees and financial support to prospective and current students is available on the University website and in the appropriate University pre-entry literature. It will also make all scholarship information available to students is easier to find and in one place on the website.

It will also ensure, as suggested by the Students' Union, that the University regularly reminds current students of the support services available to them via email, newsletter and other internal communications tools.

### **5. Bibliography**

Jones, C.M., Green, J.P. and Higson, H.E. (2015). Do Work Placements Improve Final Year Academic Performance or do High-Calibre Students Choose to do Work Placements? *Studies in Higher Education*, published online at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2015.1073249>

Moore, E., and Reddy, P.A. (2012). No regrets? Measuring the careers benefits of a psychology placement year. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 37, 535-554.

Moore, E., Birdi, G., & Higson, H.E. (2017). Placement work experience may mitigate lower achievement levels of Black and Asian vs. White students at university, *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8, 1518

### **6. Appendix**

The following documents are included in the appendix to this Access and Participation Plan:

1. Targets (tables 2a, 2b and 2c in the targets and investment plan)
2. Investment summary (tables 4a and 4b in the targets and investment plan)
3. Fee summary (table 4a and 4b in the fee information document)



**Summary of 2020-21 entrant course fees**

\*course type not listed

**Inflationary statement:**

Subject to the maximum fee limits set out in Regulations we intend to increase fees each year using the RPI-X

**Table 4a - Full-time course fee levels for 2020-21 entrants**

Full-time course type:	Additional information:	Course fee:
First degree		£9,250
Foundation degree		£9,250
Foundation year/Year 0		£9,250
HNC/HND	*	*
CertHE/DipHE	*	*
Postgraduate ITT	*	*
Accelerated degree	*	*
Sandwich year		£1,250
Erasmus and overseas study years		£1,250
Other	Integrated work based learning year	£4,625

**Table 4b - Sub-contractual full-time course fee levels for 2020-21 entrants**

Sub-contractual full-time course type:	Additional information:	Course fee:
First degree	*	*
Foundation degree	*	*
Foundation year/Year 0	*	*
HNC/HND	*	*
CertHE/DipHE	*	*
Postgraduate ITT	*	*
Accelerated degree	*	*
Sandwich year	*	*
Erasmus and overseas study years	*	*
Other	*	*

**Table 4c - Part-time course fee levels for 2020-21 entrants**

Part-time course type:	Additional information:	Course fee:
First degree		£6,935
Foundation degree	*	*
Foundation year/Year 0	*	*
HNC/HND	*	*
CertHE/DipHE	*	*
Postgraduate ITT	*	*
Accelerated degree	*	*
Sandwich year	*	*
Erasmus and overseas study years	*	*
Other	*	*

**Table 4d - Sub-contractual part-time course fee levels for 2020-21 entrants**

Sub-contractual part-time course type:	Additional information:	Course fee:
First degree	*	*
Foundation degree	*	*
Foundation year/Year 0	*	*
HNC/HND	*	*
CertHE/DipHE	*	*
Postgraduate ITT	*	*
Accelerated degree	*	*
Sandwich year	*	*
Erasmus and overseas study years	*	*
Other	*	*

# Targets and investment plan

## 2020-21 to 2024-25

Provider name: Aston University

Provider UKPRN: 10007759

### Investment summary

The OfS requires providers to report on their planned investment in access, financial support and research and evaluation in their access and participation plan. The OfS does not require providers to report on investment in student success and progression in the access and participation plans and therefore investment in these areas is not recorded here.

#### Note about the data:

The investment forecasts below in access, financial support and research and evaluation does not represent not the total amount spent by providers in these areas. It is the additional amount that providers have committed following the introduction of variable fees in 2006-07. The OfS does not require providers to report on investment in success and progression and therefore investment in these areas is not represented.

The figures below are not comparable to previous access and participation plans or access agreements as data published in previous years does not reflect latest provider projections on student numbers.

Table 4a - Investment summary (£)

Access and participation plan investment summary (£)	Academic year				
	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
<b>Total access activity investment (£)</b>	£788,646.55	£812,305.94	£836,675.13	£861,775.38	£887,628.64
Access (pre-16)	£264,698.14	£272,639.08	£280,818.26	£289,242.80	£297,920.09
Access (post-16)	£443,652.48	£456,962.06	£470,670.92	£484,791.05	£499,334.78
Access (adults and the community)	£80,295.93	£82,704.80	£85,185.95	£87,741.53	£90,373.77
Access (other)	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00
<b>Financial support (£)</b>	£80,886.00	£83,312.58	£85,811.96	£88,386.32	£91,037.91
<b>Research and evaluation (£)</b>	£104,858.89	£108,004.66	£111,244.80	£114,582.14	£118,019.60

Table 4b - Investment summary (HFI%)

Access and participation plan investment summary (%HFI)	Academic year				
	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
<b>Higher fee income (£HFI)</b>	£25,645,470.00	£26,374,525.00	£27,418,760.00	£28,205,750.00	£29,082,905.00
<b>Access investment</b>	2.4%	2.4%	2.4%	2.4%	2.4%
<b>Financial support</b>	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
<b>Research and evaluation</b>	0.4%	0.4%	0.4%	0.4%	0.4%
<b>Total investment (as %HFI)</b>	2.8%	2.8%	2.8%	2.8%	2.8%

