Aston University Birmingham

University profile

Employable Graduates. Exploitable Research goes one of the more memorable university slogans. Aston is in a better position than most to back up its prospectus claims, however. Not even Oxbridge can boast a higher proportion of students gaining graduate-level jobs on departure. Aston’s 87.7% is bettered by just four colleges in the University of London and shows a clean pair of heels to the likes of Cambridge (86.6%), Oxford (78.4%), Durham (81.5%) and Bristol (83.3%).

This is no accident for you will struggle to find a university in Britain more keenly attuned to the needs of business and industry. The extension of its degrees in international business and modern languages (first pioneered in 1984) to include Mandarin and Arabic, alongside French, German and Spanish options, is typical of its sensitivity to the changing needs of the employment market. A new degree in international politics and languages is being introduced for 2012 with the same language options. Free language tuition in European and non-European languages is also offered to every student.

Aston is no Johnny-come-lately to the concept either. For many decades it has provided sandwich degrees - long enough for them to go out of fashion and come back in again. Alongside Surrey, Ulster and Bath, Aston is one of just four universities where more than half the students are taking sandwich degrees incorporating a year working in business or industry, or a year overseas. The roughly 70% of students who do this earn an average of £16,000 during this year, which comes in handy for paying the bills, but more pertinently introduces about one-third of them to their future employer.

Aston is among the smaller universities with about 7,500 full-time undergraduates. The tight course portfolio covers the Aston Business School, engineering and applied science, languages and social sciences, and life and health sciences. Under the now defunct system of teaching assessments, excellence was found in all four schools, with 76% of students being taught within a subject classified as "excellent".

The university has continued to perform respectably now that assessment of the quality of teaching is put in the hands of students themselves via the annual National Student (satisfaction) Survey. Subjects allied to medicine (83.3%) medical sciences and pharmacy (82.5%) and biology (79.6%) performed best this year.

The Exploitable Research bit of Aston’s central slogan is evidenced by its work in areas such as drug development, with successes such as Temodal, a drug used in the treatment of brain cancer, to the fore. The university has more than 30 research groupings and the 2008 research assessments showed that 86% of work submitted was internationally significant, with 45% classified world-leading or internationally excellent. Business achieved the best results. Overall, almost nine in 10 research-active staff were submitted for assessment, so Aston cannot be accused of being selective in who it put forward. Its
performance demonstrates that research-led teaching and learning is at the heart of its modus operandi.

And students are the principal beneficiaries of this spirit, and the extensive and ongoing programme of campus improvements. The centrally-located campus is a 40-acre oasis of green in the concrete jungle of the city. The demolition of two high-rise towers in the past year has freed up more space for Aston's new student residences. Phase one was completed 12 months ago with the opening of 1,300 ensuite rooms. Roof-top wind turbines, rainwater recycling and green roofs come as standard, alongside technological mod cons such as digital television access and high-speed broadband to all rooms. A further 1,000 rooms are expected to be ready in 2013, which should allow Aston to house on-campus all first-year and final-year students who want university accommodation on returning from abroad or their sandwich placement.

As the costs of higher education rise, campus universities such as Aston and Lancaster with their ambitious student residence building programmes stand to benefit from being able to offer budget-priced rooms close to lectures, libraries and laboratories.

Aston has opted to charge the maximum £9,000 fee with a reduced fee of £1,000 for sandwich placement/study abroad years. This latter fee will be discounted to zero where the placement/study abroad is unpaid or if students are from from homes where the income is less than £18,000 a year. The scholarship programme is designed to sugar the fees pill and the university is targeting support particularly at those students from poorer and more deprived backgrounds that it has such a good track record of recruiting. The university has doubled the number of places under the National Scholarship Programme (NSP) from the 78 it was originally allocated. This means that all those coming from homes where the income is less than £14,000 a year will receive one of the 156 NSP awards worth £9,000 in the first year (£1,000 in fee waiver, £1,000 in accommodation discount). These students will also earn a £1,000 placement year discount (meaning effectively no fees at all during the placement year) plus a further £500 fee/residencies discount in their second and final year.

Where income is between £14,000 and £18,000, support in later years is the same, but there is a reduced £1,000 scholarship in the first year taken as a fee waiver or accommodation discount. When income rises as high as £18,000, there will be a £500 annual scholarship to be set against fees or room costs. About 45% of students are expected to qualify for one of these levels of support.

The university does not offer any academic scholarships. It cites the fact that 40% of its entrants last September gained AAB or better at A-level and current entry grade average hovers somewhere between AAB and ABB from the best three A-levels.

"Awarding money on arbitrary Ucas points/grades is unfair and is not money well spent," the university says. It does, however, offer sports bursaries worth £500, and about 20 bursaries of £5,000 for students on unpaid placements.

Aston has one of the more diverse student populations. About one in five come from overseas and the university matches or beats its target recruitment of state school-educated children, those from working class backgrounds and those from postcodes with a poor record in sending into higher education. Student tutoring, mentoring, revision classes, summer schools and masterclasses all keep recruitment high from within the West Midlands.

Aston, and Birmingham beyond, is a known quantity for many, but for those less familiar with the city, it may come as a pleasant surprise. Those who describe it as England's Venice might be wearing rose-tinted spectacles, but canalside and city centre bars, restaurants and venues abound. The city is famous for its curry, the so-called Balti Triangle being more famous even than the Aston Triangle and allegedly responsible for the consumption of 100,000kg of onions a week. And arts, cultural and sporting venues belit Birmingham's status as England's second city.

On-campus, the grade II-listed Woodcock sports centre - featuring its splendid Edwardian swimming baths - is about to reopen following refurbishment and there are plans to build a sports hall to adjoin it.

With more than seven applications for every place, this year's hard-to-fathom 17% drop in applications will be welcome news for those chasing one of the better deals in British higher education.

Student view

Mergani Ibrahim, students' guild president:

First impressions A small, diverse university, which makes it easy to meet lots of people and adapt to student life.

Worst feature The location means that some of the sports clubs have to travel about five miles to get to their fields or pitches - but the union has provided a minibus.

Student jobs Our students' guild job shop works with Birmingham employers to provide all kinds of work, both full and part-time. Students can drop in, email, or just send a CV if they're interested.

Deal clincher The university has a good reputation in Birmingham, and there is great sense of community that combines with the academia and the guild to create a brilliant student experience.