

**RE-P-2020-03-Annex B**

# **Aston University**

## **HEIF accountability statement**

**Narrative return template for HEIF funding period  
2021-22 to 2024-25**

**Return date: 21 May 2021**

Return as Microsoft Word file to: [KEPolicy@re.ukri.org](mailto:KEPolicy@re.ukri.org)

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## Question 1 – Strategic objectives

Summarise the institutional strategic objectives that relate to knowledge exchange and guide your plans for HEIF.

We expect institutions' plans for HEIF to be guided by strategic objectives for knowledge exchange. However, there is no requirement for institutions to submit or maintain a standalone knowledge exchange strategy document.

We appreciate that KE objectives may be found in a specific KE strategy document or they may be contained as part of other strategic documents such as teaching, research or overarching institutional strategies.

Whatever form your knowledge exchange objectives are in, please provide a precis of the main objectives here so that we can see the strategic context that guides your plans for HEIF and forms the basis for your monitoring and delivery of intended benefits.

We welcome the inclusion of hyperlinks to published strategies and plans that may be referenced in the summary.

*In answer to this question, you are free to use text or tabular format but please ensure that the question response is contained in no more than two pages of A4.*

Aston is a research-active, technical University located in central Birmingham comprising three Colleges – Business and Social Sciences, Health and Life Sciences and Engineering and Physical Sciences. We are a 'dual intensive' University, which values excellence in education and research equally.

Since the creation of our forerunner institution in 1895, we have consistently responded to the needs of the city and its surrounding regions, partnering with employers to advance the knowledge and skills of citizens. Our mission remains true to this tradition and is "to be the UK's leading University for business and the professions, where original research, enterprise and inspiring teaching deliver global impact".

[Aston's institutional strategy](#) (2018-2023) elevates the importance of Knowledge Exchange by structuring thinking directly around our beneficiaries, parties external to the University whom we exist to serve. We have categorised our beneficiaries into three groups: our students, who progress to be our graduates and alumni; external organisations (comprising businesses, public entities, the not-for-profit sector, and the

professions), who employ our students, and engage with us directly on research and educational programmes; and the region and society, which we serve as a public University, with a strong sense of place.

The University firmly believes that KE is fundamental to delivering a world-class student experience and we have a pioneering reputation for graduate employability, student entrepreneurship and our business growth & innovation programmes. It is the combination of these factors and our commitment to social mobility, which we believe make Aston unique in UK HE. Our distinctive approach was recognised in the Knowledge Exchange Framework and through the 'University of the Year 2020' accolade from the Guardian and the 'Entrepreneurial University of the Year 2020' award from the Times.

In December 2020, the University approved a new 5-year [Knowledge Exchange Strategy](#) which sharpens our approach to KE across five key priority areas: (1) Research and Knowledge Transfer; (2) Degree Apprenticeships & Work-based Learning; (3) Employability & Entrepreneurship; (4) Regional and Civic Engagement; and (5) Engagement with Private, Public and Third-sector Partners.

**Research and Knowledge Transfer:** Our [research strategy](#) focusses on the growth of multidisciplinary centres that can be regional, national and international leaders both in research and KE. Our 'beneficiaries approach' and track record of research on real-world problems mean that impact is deeply embedded in our academic culture. Aston's is a member of Midlands Innovation and our research activity is structured around our collaborative, multi-disciplinary University Research Institutes (URI) which represent areas of critical mass, and excellent research with impact: Aston Institute of Photonic Technologies; Energy and Bioproducts Research Institute; Aston Institute of Health and Neurodevelopment; and Aston Institute for Forensic Linguistics. The URIs generate a significant volume of UKRI funding and are key drivers of research impact.

**Degree Apprenticeships & Work-based Learning:** Aston has from its foundation offered practical learning focused on the needs of business and industry. Our portfolio of undergraduate and post-graduate programmes have consistently focused on producing "work ready" professionals in business, engineering and life sciences. In addition, we have a significant track record in providing executive education programmes, short courses and CPD solutions to industry.

We pioneered degree apprenticeships, having offered our Digital and Technology Solutions programme since the introduction of the apprenticeship levy, and celebrated the first degree apprenticeship graduates in the country in 2017. Today we have more than 1,000 apprentices enrolled, from over 300 employers, studying across sixteen programmes at level 6 and 7, with more apprenticeships under development.

**Employability & Entrepreneurship:** Aston is one of the highest rated universities for graduate employability in the country. Our close links with business and industry ensure that Aston degree programmes are relevant, constantly updated and meet the needs of

graduate employers. Our commitment to nurturing student entrepreneurship is evident through the extensive range of practical, innovative entrepreneurial programmes taking place across the University under the 'Aston Enterprise' banner.

We are ranked first in the UK for value-added (The Guardian University Guide 2020) and employers are paying higher salaries to Aston graduates in almost every subject compared to the sector average. The Placement Year is a key enabler to driving positive graduate destinations. Our success is built on developing partnerships to provide businesses with the range of higher-level skills that they need. Local links are crucial as a third of our students come from Birmingham and half come from the West Midlands; a proportion which is increasing year-on-year. 49.6% of the 2018/19 intake came from the West Midlands, while 33% came from the city of Birmingham itself.

**Regional and Civic Engagement:** Aston's [approach](#) tackles social and economic challenges, informs and influences policy to foster a culture of evidence-based policymaking. We work closely with regional bodies, developing shared projects that benefit citizens. Aston recently agreed a civic university agreement with Birmingham City Council, WMCA, GBSLEP, Birmingham Community Healthcare NHS Trust, Aston Villa Football Club, Greater Birmingham Chamber of Commerce and Aston Students Union.

**Business Engagement:** Aston's commitment to the development of ambitious small business leaders particularly stands out across the UK due to its scale (number of businesses, initiatives, and funding). Aston is the most active university in the Midlands and the 9th highest in the UK for the value of consultancy activities undertaken with SMEs (18/19 HE-BCI data). We are a recognised specialist in scale-up support for high-growth businesses and firmly embedded in the regional business support ecosystem as a strategic partner in the Greater Birmingham & Solihull LEP Growth Hub. These activities have played a key role in supporting the local economy during the COVID-19 crisis.

## Question 2 – Use of HEIF

### How do you intend to use your 2021-22 to 24-25 HEIF allocations?

As detailed in [RE-CL-2020-04](#) and RE-P-2020-03., in order to enable institutions to effectively respond to the Covid-19 pandemic, we will use the 2019-20 HEIF Annual Monitoring Statement submitted in February 2021 to gather information about the use of HEIF during 2020-21,

In this accountability statement return we would like to know about your plans for HEIF for the remainder of the funding period 2021-22 to 2024-25. Please include indication of the planned timescale of the activity e.g. 2021-22 only; ongoing or 2022-23 onwards.

Please use the response layout grid provided overleaf, to provide the following information:

- a) Describe the key activities supported by your HEIF allocation.
- b) Include specific reference to how you expect HEIF to support these activities – i.e. specific expenditures: funded posts, academic staff buy out, internal competitive projects; and the proportion of the activity that is supported by HEIF (e.g. x1 business development post 50% HEIF funded).
- c) How these activities relate to the government priorities and RE-OfS strategic objectives outlined in paragraphs 9 and 10 of RE-P-2020-03. Where student benefits are achieved, please include an indication of the number of students benefiting.
- d) Which strategic KE objective, as outlined in question 1, does each activity relate to.
- e) Indication of the timescale for each activity (e.g. 2021-22 only, ongoing or to be confirmed)

*In answer to this question, please use the response grid provided and ensure that the entire question response is contained in no more than six pages of A4 or A3.*

**Question 2: Use of HEIF**

(Max 6 pages of A4 or A3)

| <p><b>Planned areas of HEIF supported KE activity</b></p> <p>Please provide an overview of planned KE activities or projects that will be supported by your 2021-22 and onwards HEIF allocations.</p>   | <p><b>HEIF support</b></p> <p>How HEIF will be used to support the project?</p>   | <p><b>HEIF priorities</b></p> <p>How does this relate to govt priorities and RE-OfS strategic objectives? (Including note of scale where student benefits are achieved.)</p>  | <p><b>Strategic objectives</b></p> <p>Which institutional strategic KE objective does this relate to?</p> | <p><b>Indication of timescales</b></p> |
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| <p><b>Research and Knowledge Transfer</b></p>   |   |   |   |  |
| <p>Business Development team in Research and Knowledge Exchange whose role is to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Establish long-term collaborative R&amp;D partnerships across our three Colleges.</li> <li>2. Maximise the impact of our Intellectual Property and oversee our IP budget and new Proof of concept fund.</li> <li>3. Further develop and manage our sector-leading portfolio of Knowledge Transfer Partnerships.</li> <li>4. Harness the capabilities and growth potential of these partnerships cross the University – e.g. through our portfolio of Industry Clubs.</li> <li>5. Work with colleagues to coordinate relationships with key partners such as West Midlands Growth Company, Greater Birmingham Chamber of Commerce, CBI and Make UK.</li> </ol> <p><b>Target: Collaborative R&amp;D awards to consistently account for 20% of total University research awards with a target of 25% by 2025; Top 3 in UK for KTP and MKTP with total portfolio of 30-40 projects; Licence Income of £100k+ per annum; 1-2 Spinouts formed per year; and successful growth in the number of companies engaged in strategic relationships across Aston.</b></p> | <p>1 x Director of Knowledge Exchange<br/>3.75 x Business Development Managers<br/>1 x KTP Manager and Coordinator<br/>1 x Technology Transfer Manager<br/>1 x placement student role.<br/>(Fully HEIF-funded).<br/><br/>Patent budget and new Proof of Concept fund (100% HEIF-funded but will leverage external funds).</p> | <p>Supports the ‘Ideas’ and ‘Place’ pillars of the Industrial Strategy by establishing high impact R&amp;D and commercialisation projects, many of which are in the West Midlands.</p> <p>Supports the UK R&amp;D Roadmap by: 1) Driving up Innovation and Productivity; and 2) Levelling up R&amp;D across the UK, particularly amongst SMEs.</p> <p>Aston’s three Industry Clubs (Computer Science, Mechanical Engineering &amp; Design and Chemical Engineering &amp; Applied Chemistry) support over 400 students per annum through guest lectures, targeted events and direct recruitment.</p> | <p><b>KE Objective 1 – Research and Knowledge Transfer</b></p>  | <p>2021-22 onwards</p>                 |

| <b>Employability</b>  |  |   |  |  |
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| <p>1. Programme to educate and support SMEs in the West Midlands on ways Aston can add value and help to boost their productivity through increased access to post-graduate talent and experienced hire.</p> <p>The education and support will also cover development of Health and Safety policies, advice and guidance on developing job descriptions and support with remote working arrangements for placement students.</p> <p><b>Target: 240 SMEs actively engaged and supported (21/22 to 23/24)</b></p> | <p>1 x Employer Engagement Executive (post-graduate) post 50% HEIF funded.</p> <p>Plus 1 placement student role.</p> | <p>Supports the following three pillars of the Industrial Strategy: 'Developing skills'; 'Supporting businesses to start and grow'; and 'Driving growth across the whole country' through increased access to graduate talent and skills.</p> <p>OfS objective 3 for students to progress into employment, anticipate circa 500 students will be engaged.</p>   | <p><b>KE Objective 3</b> - graduate employability</p> <p><b>KE Objective 4</b> - Regional and Civic Engagement</p>             | <p>3 year period from 2021/2022 academic year to 2023/2024</p> |
| <p>2. Programme to support SMEs in the West Midlands to boost their productivity through the new flexible placements model and an enhanced matching service offering tailored recruitment support to those struggling to secure a placement.</p> <p><b>Target: 240 SMEs actively engaged and supported (21/22 to 23/24)</b></p>   | <p>1 x Employer Engagement Executive (flexible placements) post 50% HEIF funded.</p>                                 | <p>Supports the following three pillars of the Industrial Strategy: 'Developing skills'; 'Supporting businesses to start and grow'; and 'Driving growth across the whole country' through increased access to graduate talent and skills.</p> <p>OfS objective 3 for students to progress into employment, anticipate circa 1,000 students will be engaged.</p> | <p><b>KE Objective 3</b> - Employability and Entrepreneurship</p> <p><b>KE Objective 4</b> - Regional and Civic Engagement</p> | <p>3 year period from 2021/2022 academic year to 2023/2024</p> |
| <p>3. Programme to support SMEs in the West Midlands region to boost their productivity through the provision of bursaries to enable wider access to graduate talent; provision of</p>  | <p>1 x Employer Engagement Manager (graduate) post</p>   | <p>Supports the following three pillars of the Industrial Strategy: 'Developing skills'; 'Supporting businesses to</p>  | <p><b>KE Objective 3</b> - Employability and Entrepreneurship</p>  | <p>3 year period from 2021/2022 academic</p>                   |

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| <p>leadership support to enable the successful delivery of Aston's delivery of the HLSM project.</p> <p>Through the HLSM project, SMEs have access to free upskilling courses, student and graduate recruitment as well as allowing them to build networks through networking events.</p> <p><b>Target: 340 businesses engaged (21/22 to 23/24)</b></p>  | <p>50% HEIF funded.</p>  | <p>start and grow'; and 'Driving growth across the whole country' through increased access to graduate talent and skills'.</p> <p>OfS objective 3 for students to progress into employment, anticipate circa 100 students will be directly involved.</p> | <p><b>KE Objective 4 -</b><br/>Regional and Civic Engagement</p>   | <p>year to 2023/2024</p>   |
| <p><b>Student Entrepreneurship</b></p>   |  |  |  |                            |
| <p>Aston Enterprise is a department of 3 whose mission is to help curious students and graduates to explore experiment and launch new ideas. The team focuses on giving real-life insights from entrepreneurs from diverse industries and encouraging students to learn in a practical way with likeminded people and to think differently.</p> <p>1. Aston Enterprise 'How to start up' a series of 6 fireside chats with entrepreneurs from different sectors, providing aspirational but relatable role models.</p> <p>Interactive workshops on creating business ideas and setting up an online business.</p> <p><b>Target: 300 students per annum</b></p> | <p>3 x FTE project management posts oversee and deliver these activities (50% funded from HEIF).</p> | <p>Supports the Government's and OfS levelling up agenda. Circa 300 students will be involved.</p>   | <p><b>KE Objective 3 -</b><br/>Employability and Entrepreneurship</p> <p><b>KE Objective 4 -</b><br/>Regional and Civic Engagement</p> | <p>2021 – 2024 onwards</p> |
| <p>2. Apollo Accelerator – 6-week programme designed to bridge the gap between ideation and incubation and enable student entrepreneurs to validate their business idea. Funded by Santander Universities.</p> <p><b>Target: 35 students per annum</b></p>   |  | <p>Supports the Government's and OfS levelling up agenda and skills agenda. Circa 35 students will participate.</p>  | <p><b>KE Objective 3 -</b><br/>Employability and Entrepreneurship</p> <p><b>KE Objective 4 -</b><br/>Regional and Civic Engagement</p> | <p>2021 – 2024 onwards</p> |



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| <p>3. Annual business idea pitching competition including pitching and video production training, culminating in a pitch to expert judges and community vote. Prize money of provided by Santander Universities.</p> <p><b>Target: 50 students per annum</b></p>   |  | <p>Supports the Government's and OfS levelling up agenda and skills agenda. Circa 50 students will be involved.</p>                                       | <p><b>KE Objective 3 -</b><br/>Employability and Entrepreneurship</p> <p><b>KE Objective 4 -</b><br/>Regional and Civic Engagement</p> | <p>2021 – 2024 onwards</p>  |
| <p>4. Enterprise bursaries of between £500 to £1500 provided on a selective basis to student and recent graduate startups.</p> <p><b>Target: 10 students per annum</b></p>   |  | <p>Supports 'ideas' pillar of IS, by enabling new venture creation and innovation in startups. Circa 10 students or recent graduates will be awarded.</p> | <p><b>KE Objective 3 -</b><br/>Employability and Entrepreneurship</p> <p><b>KE Objective 4 -</b><br/>Regional and Civic Engagement</p> | <p>Project runs from 2019 - 2023</p>  |
| <p>5. BSEEN student and graduate start up support programme and incubator. Offers 12 months of support including startup training via the boot camp, mentoring, grant funding, free office space and supportive entrepreneurial community.</p> <p><b>Target: 40 startups launched and supported per annum</b></p>  |  | <p>Supports 'ideas' pillar of IS, by enabling new venture creation and innovation in startups. Circa 40 startups will be launched and supported.</p>      | <p><b>KE Objective 3 -</b><br/>Employability and Entrepreneurship</p> <p><b>KE Objective 4 -</b><br/>Regional and Civic Engagement</p> |   |
| <p><b>Regional and Civic Agenda</b></p>  |  |   |  |   |
| <p>1. Team costs to develop, coordinate and report on regional, CSR and Civic activities.</p> <p>Civic and community engagement. Bringing us closer to our local community of people, regional bodies and businesses to develop a holistic approach for Birmingham and wider WM. By understanding local needs we are able to respond to gaps in the innovation ecosystem to develop effective business support projects and target our contract research</p> | <p>1 x Director of Regional Strategy; 1 x Regional Public Affairs Manager; and 1 x Regional Engagement</p> | <p>This fits with the government's levelling up and place agendas.</p>  | <p><b>KE Objective 4 -</b><br/>Regional and Civic Engagement</p>   | <p>One post is permanent</p> <p>One post is to Jan 2022</p> <p>The other is to July 2022.</p> |

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| <p>and consultancy activities to the economic plans of regional partners.</p> <p><b>Target – Closer engagement with regional bodies resulting in more collaborative projects growing our working with the public and third sector income.</b></p>  | <p>Officer (0.4).<br/>(Fully HEIF-funded).</p>                        |  |  |                        |
| <p>2. Strategic Partnerships</p> <p>A, <b>Citizens UK</b> provide insight into local citizen's perspectives and priorities which are key to our regional strategy and civic agreement.</p> <p>They also provide training sessions for staff and students and have provided paid placements-it is hoped that this will continue to support 2 placements a year.</p> <p><b>Target – 30+ students per annum trained in community organising. Increased involvement of community groups in research bids.</b></p> <p><b>B, Birmingham Knowledge Quarter</b></p> <p>Provides an opportunity to make our area a destination for funding, research, students, community and other activities.</p> <p><b>Target – development of shared initiatives across the KQ in areas such as 5G and sustainability.</b></p> <p><b>C Contribution to CLES for Birmingham Anchor Network Coordinator</b></p> <p>Supports local community wealth building by using our anchor institution status to recruit and procure locally (providing support to get local people into jobs and local firms to respond to tenders).</p> <p>Target – More local firms access the network's procurement opportunities. Local people upskilled to access suitable employment opportunities at Aston or in the network</p> | <p>Membership costs and associated activities. Fully HEIF-funded.</p> | <p>A wider number of students also benefit through engaging in Citizens UK training – expected to be 30+. This fits with the Government's priority around integrated communities.</p> <p>This fits with Government Place and levelling up agendas.</p> | <p><b>KE Objective 3 -</b><br/>Employability and Entrepreneurship</p> <p><b>KE Objective 4 -</b><br/>Regional and Civic Engagement</p> | <p>2021/22 onwards</p> |

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| <p>3. WM-REDI</p> <p>Working across institutions to deliver shared goals is essential to effective KE. WM-REDI partners Aston with BCU and the University of Birmingham (as lead body) to combine academic potential, share knowledge of economic development trends, and supply a multi-agency response to public sector partners in relation to policy making.</p> <p><b>Target – Boosted Global Entrepreneurship Monitor survey and Panel Study of Entrepreneurial Dynamics resulting in enhanced data on the contribution of Ethnic Minority Businesses to the West Midlands Economy to inform policy. Closer engagement with WM-REDI partners resulting in more collaborative activities.</b></p>   | <p>1 x 0.5FTE plus consumables and travel</p> <p>(Fully HEIF-funded)</p>  | <p>Our part of this project builds the evidence base for the contribution of ethnic minority businesses to the WM and UK economy</p> <p>This supports the Government levelling up agenda</p> | <p><b>KE Objective 4 - Regional and Civic Engagement</b></p>                               | <p>Committed to continue to end of March 2023</p> |
| <p><b>Business Engagement</b></p>  |   |  |  |   |
| <p>Business Insights Team to support and enable all areas of knowledge exchange. Their primary role is to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Collect and record data on Aston’s engagement with external organisations.</li> <li>2. Co-ordinate a process of account management, ensuring that the University’s key client base gets an agile and responsive service.</li> <li>3. Train staff on knowledge exchange products and services and encourage high quality referrals into KE.</li> <li>4. Use labour market information to test viability of new courses and identify targets for engagement.</li> <li>5. Develop high revenue/high impact partnerships (particularly increased Degree Apprenticeships) through effective account management.</li> </ol> <p><b>Targets: 36 quality referrals per year; Increased number of employer partners engaging in work-based learning</b></p> | <p>1 x Head of Business Insights</p> <p>1 x Enterprise Coordinator</p> <p>1 x Marketing Manager</p> <p>(Fully HEIF-funded).</p> | <p>This area underpins all of Aston’s KE activities and is therefore relevant to all of the priorities above.</p>  | <p><b>KE Objective 5 - Engagement with private, public and third sectors partners.</b></p> | <p>21/22 onwards</p>                              |

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| <b>(KPI converting 20% of top tier employability partners to degree apprenticeships).</b> |  |  |  |  |
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### Question 3 – Monitoring success

How do you manage your HEIF funding and monitor the success of your activities against the strategic objectives set out in question 1, and in line with delivering Government priorities?

Describe the policies, procedures and approach you have in place in the context of your strategic objectives to:

- i. manage your HEIF spending
- ii. measure progress
- iii. evaluate outcomes and
- iv. identify lessons learned.

*In answer to this question, you are free to use text or tabular format but please ensure that the entire question response is contained in no more than four pages of A4.*

**MANAGING OUR HEIF SPENDING:** HEIF plays a crucial and longstanding role in supporting KE at Aston. Strategic decision-making is taken at Executive level to maximise impact and reflecting the importance of these activities to the University. Our PVC Research and Executive Director of Business Engagement jointly oversee our Research and Knowledge Exchange (RKE) office which has direct responsibility for supporting many of our key KE activities including research and knowledge transfer, business insights, Degree Apprenticeships/Corporate Education and regional partnership activity. RKE also coordinates all HEIF reporting, the annual HE-BCI return, KEF and support for our institutional engagement with the KE Concordat.

The University has a Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Engagement) dedicated to maximising beneficiary engagement and satisfaction. The engagement portfolio consists of student support functions (including support with placements and careers), business and civic engagement, marketing, and development and alumni relations. The role maximises the impact of our HEIF activities by providing portfolio leadership and co-ordination, enhancing synergies and joint working between existing functions.

The University's approach to investing HEIF has remained consistent over time reflecting both the enduring nature of our goals and their alignment with regional and national priorities. A significant proportion of our allocation is used to fund key KE staff and non-pay costs in RKE along with additional HEIF investment used for targeted activities relating to student employability and entrepreneurship. To encourage the development of

new approaches to KE we run an annual open call for proposals which we will broaden to support Aston KE Concordat action-plan which is currently under development.

**MEASURING PROGRESS:** Aston has strong arrangements in place to oversee progress against our KE objectives and HEIF-funded activities. Responsibility for this ultimately sits with our Council who monitor 14 Key performance indicators alongside our Executive Team. The encompass student success measures together with a range of financial and non-financial indicators for KE including: 1) Research Funding Awards; 2) Employer Reputation; Income from Degree Apprenticeships; 3) Income from business and other non-HE Collaboration (HE-BCI and KEF); and 4) Undergraduate Outcomes – Highly Skilled Employment or Further Study. The University also actively measures progress in our five priority KE areas:

**Research and Knowledge Transfer:** Aston's Research Strategy (2019-2023) is constructed around four mutually reinforcing elements: Impact, Collaboration, Excellence, and Sustainability. Together with our new Knowledge Exchange (KE) Strategy, they provide a strong framework to prioritise strategic investment, and assess how research and KE activities deliver for our beneficiaries.

Our University Research Institutes operate as flagships for delivering high quality research, impact and other KE outcomes. They are required to produce clear business plans outlining their contribution to a range of activities (including KE) and these are subject to review every two years ('light-touch' internal review) and four years (where external assessors consider the full range of the URI's activities).

Our Research Committee has responsibility for formally evaluating performance the following University/ College KPIs: 1. Value of industrial research awards and percentage as a proportion of total research awards (25% of total by 2025); 2. KTP portfolio size (40 by 2025); 3. Share of research outputs jointly produced with businesses and other external partners (to grow from 5.8% to 10% by 2025); 4. IP licence income; and 5. number of successful start-ups formed (10 active spin-outs by 2025).

We pay particular attention to our sector-leading KTP activities as we see this as a key route to impact and platform for many of our other KE activities. Aston's KTP portfolio is the 8th largest in the UK and the University has committed to further growth which would place at the top of the sector. We monitor quality through final project grading and awards - Aston has won recognition at the Innovate UK national awards in both 2019 and 2020.

**Degree Apprenticeships & work-based learning:** While our programmes have always been designed with input from industry specialists and employer representatives, the most fundamental measure of our success are enduring employer partnerships, repeat commissions and portfolio growth within employer organisations. We monitor our employer and apprentice satisfaction results as published by the ESFA, whilst at the same time engaging directly with apprentices through our formal feedback processes and with employers through our account management structure, to ensure our programmes are fit for purpose and delivering the outcomes employers and apprentices desire.

**Employability and Entrepreneurship:** We closely monitor the impact of our employability activities using a series of measures including rankings data, mobility data, student characteristics data, placements data and Labour Market Intelligence. These labour market insights ensure that Aston degree programmes are relevant, constantly updated and respond directly to employer demand. Collectively, these sources provide us with a more complete picture of our impact supporting data-driven, evidence-based decisions to drive forward positive graduate outcomes.

Activity is measured on two key areas: positive graduate destinations and placement numbers. Currently, 81.3% of Aston's graduates are in a positive graduate destination 15 months after graduation, against a sector average of 74.1%, now ranking us 30th in the UK overall (2021 Times/Sunday Times Good University Guide). Aston have over 1900 students on placement which equates to 74% of the cohort and places us 4th in the UK for sandwich placements (HESA Performance Indicators).

**Regional and civic engagement:** Aston is committed to being an anchor institution and a civic university supporting our city and region. Our Civic agreement puts citizens at the centre and is focussed on recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic with themes of health and wellbeing, inclusion and reducing inequality, support for businesses, sustainability and environment, crime and justice, education and employment.

We measure progress through the following KPIs: 1) Positive view amongst Community to increase from 50 to 66% (annual Citizens Survey); 2) Regeneration income normalised by HEI income; 3) Public and community engagement self-assessment – aim to improve from 16/25 to 18/25 in 2021/22; and 3) HE-BCI contract research income with the public and third sector normalised by HE income and HE-BCI consultancy and facilities income with the public and third sector normalised by HEI income.

**Engagement with private, public and third sectors partners:** Aston has over 1,700 staff and many engage directly with organisations in the private, public and third sector. We are working to create a highly collaborative culture to empower staff to spot opportunities and build meaningful and mutually beneficial partnerships. Our Business Insights team uses data to drive decision making and to proactively target best fit organisations and oversees account management to coordinate and develop relationships with innovative SMEs and larger organisations.

We measure success in the following ways: 1) Increased number of quality internal referrals into knowledge exchange services (KPI 36 quality referrals per year); 2) Increased number of employer partners engaging in work-based learning (KPI converting 20% of top tier employability partners to degree apprenticeships); 3) Increased number of strategic partnerships developed with target best fit organisations; and 4) Evidence of enhanced capability of internal staff to spot broad opportunities for knowledge exchange.

**EVALUATING OUTCOMES:** Aston's 2018-23 strategy defines the key outcomes we expect for our beneficiaries.

Business and the Professions: 1) We will teach the skills and knowledge that businesses and professional organisations require to grow; 2) We will link businesses, the

professions and other organisations to graduate employees and entrepreneurs and 3) We will ensure businesses and the professions benefit from our translational research and knowledge exchange activities.

Our Region and Society: 1) Through widening participation, we will create educational opportunities for the students of our region, regardless of their background; 2) Our research, innovation and enterprise activities will enhance the economy and improve quality of life in the West Midlands and beyond; and 3) We will build partnerships and global connections through our research collaborators, international alumni and students.

Our Students: 1) Students will have high rates of employment in desirable jobs following graduation; 2) Students will have a fulfilling educational experience, have developed social capital and be well-equipped to succeed in life; and 3) Students will be highly skilled in their discipline and have a global and entrepreneurial mindset.

We aim to rigorously monitor impact for all our beneficiary groups. We engage directly with stakeholders in a variety of ways (systematic and ad hoc) to actively seek feedback, to understand user needs, to inform changes and service improvements. Regular planned monitoring activity includes placement annual evaluation survey, student satisfaction survey and employer survey. The University also measures progress on key projects against projections as well as engaging with regional bodies and Citizens UK.

We also review outcomes through rigorous external evaluation of the social and economic impact we have on our region – see study by [Metro Dynamics](#), 2019. The work of our Enterprise Research Centre and the Centre for Research in Ethnic Minority Entrepreneurship inform both government policy and the evaluation of our programmes. We use five key measures to evaluate employability outcomes. These are: 1) employer placement evaluation survey; 2) employer feedback collated and shared for insights; 3) type of company (e.g. SME/Large); overall % students placed; and 4) location of placements and diversity of students placed; and 5) graduate outcomes tracking.

**IDENTIFY LESSONS LEARNED:** Aston has a longstanding track-record of innovation in KE and we have helped to pioneer a number of high-profile activities which have subsequently been cited as sector best practice (including sandwich placements, degree apprenticeships, innovation vouchers and growth programmes for SMEs). The University works across disciplines, institutions and partners to proactively create and implement new ideas and to undertake KE activities which inspires staff, students and external partners. We actively support the development of the KE concordat and KEF.

The University recently conducted an independent review of progress against the implementation of its 2018-2023 strategy. The process involved facilitated focus groups with representatives from Aston's students, its business partners and its local community and analysed data on Aston's high-level performance. It confirmed the success of our beneficiary-led philosophy and identified opportunities to develop this further.

Our focus on work experience and employability is transformational but has been a particular challenge in the Covid context of a contracting labour market, travel restrictions and increasing personal pressures for students. Recent data from the Institute of Student



Employers (ISE) states graduate level jobs are down by around 12% and on average jobs board postings have reduced by 45-55% in the West Midlands.

In response, we have developed a more holistic approach building in flexibility and resilience into delivery models – such as new agile placement options that take account of the external context but still allow students to develop essential skills, improve their confidence and deliver impactful results for employers. It further develops employability in the curriculum as central to programme design and also makes it easier for employers, particularly SMEs, to access skills on a short-term basis.

We seek to learn quickly from our own experience and from our external partners and from sector best practice (e.g. Praxis AURIL). Other examples of our approach include:

1. Midlands Innovation projects: [ERA](#), [TALENT](#) and the Connecting Capabilities-funded [MICRA](#) project. Aston leads the [Inclusive Transformation](#) research theme.
2. Aston is currently one of ten universities collaborating on an [Advance HE](#) project focussed on enterprise and entrepreneurship Education in Higher Education. The project involves SFEDI (the UK Government-recognised Sector Skills Organisation for enterprise and business support) and involves a survey and benchmarking across institutions.
3. We are part of the [Civic Universities Network](#) which is highly valuable in sharing best practice. We are also members of Citizens UK and part of their leadership group.
4. Aston is a major partner in the Greater Birmingham and Solihull [Institute of Technology](#), a joint partnership between employers, local Colleges and universities.