

ASTON
InTouch

ALUMNI MAGAZINE
2019



THE BUSINESS ISSUE

ASTON
IN 1981

CHEQUES AND
THE CITY

THE FUTURE
OF ENERGY

06 *Aston is my lucky place*22 *The language of work*

WELCOME

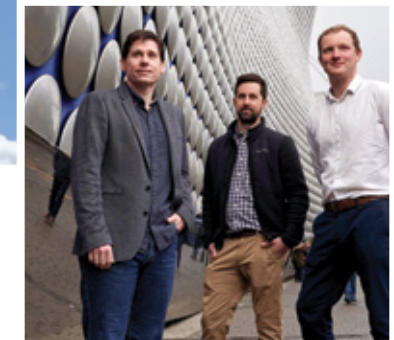
As a recent Aston Law School graduate and future trainee solicitor at Latham & Watkins, I am honoured to join the Aston alumni network and guest edit this business issue of Aston In Touch. Currently, I am the SME Engagement Manager at the Aston Business School's Centre for Growth as well as building my own media and broadcasting business, Talk About Ltd. This means my days are spent either speaking to business owners in various sectors or learning about what makes a successful business. As a businesswoman and future international commercial lawyer, this issue of Aston In Touch greatly appeals to me. My time spent at Aston (both as a student and an employee) has shown me that business is not just a subject area but is all around us every second of every day. In this issue, Xenia Zhang (p. 6) beautifully explains how working as an international chef and food blogger has opened her up to different cultures. She emphasises the importance of being open to new experiences, people, and pursuing one's dreams - even if they are unconventional. This same approach is demonstrated by Arese Ugwu (p. 12) who successfully stepped into her career as a blogger and finance author in Nigeria. Her work encourages everyone to take advantage of opportunities no matter where they are. The insight into Mark Smith's working life (p. 16) is just one of many examples of how versatile Aston employees are. Alongside his executive role, Mark organises business conferences on the beaches of Cornwall. Passionate about agile working, Mark is definitely leading by example. Last but not least, we look at the amazing growth that Gymshark has experienced over the years (p. 19). From an idea in Birmingham all the way to a brand that sends products to customers across 131 countries, Ben Francis's work embodies what it means to be ambitious, hardworking, and innovative.



Venandah Madanhi
Guest Editor and Birmingham's
Top 30 Under 30.
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Aston University is best in the UK for “value-added”

The Guardian University Guide 2020 has ranked Aston University as number one in the country for “value-added”, a rise of 22 places from last year. This score relates to students who have entered an institution with lower qualifications – and are therefore less likely to achieve firsts or 2:1s – but whose performance exceeds expectations. The Guardian has also rated Aston as the 36th best university in the UK out of a possible 121 institutions. The number of students who continue their courses has risen to ninth place – up 16 from the previous table. To calculate its rankings, the Guardian University Guide uses nine statistical measures to determine university performance, which are then knitted together to determine an overall score.



Doors open to new Students' Union

After much anticipation, on May 1st 2019 Aston's new Students' Union building was opened by Sir Dominic Cadbury at a reception attended by staff, students and alumni. The spacious building, named for Sir Adrian Cadbury (brother to Sir Dominic and Aston's Chancellor from 1979 to 2004), takes the place of the much-loved Guild building which has struggled to accommodate the increase in student numbers over the past few years. The new building is adjacent to Chancellor's Lake and has a range of food and drink outlets, social spaces (including a balcony overlooking campus), prayer and meeting rooms, a shop, and two halls for events. The reception area includes a display of quotes from alumni who donated to the project. At the launch, Vice-Chancellor, Professor Alec Cameron, remarked:



“This is an incredibly open building with great flexibility; there are so many ways that the spaces in this building can be used, and the students will conceive ways of using it that we haven't even thought of. The Union is where students come together and socialise with friends; they join clubs and societies and they develop leadership attributes. For many of us who went to university, we remember the stuff that happened outside the classroom – in the students' union, on the playing field, with our friends – and that's the gift that we want to give to our students.” Amna Atteeq, President of Aston Students' Union, said: “This was a five-year plan and now it's a reality. Let's look around and appreciate everyone's hard work. I just want to say that I'm so proud to be part of a university that puts students first and makes this happen.” A strong supporter of Aston University over five decades, Sir Adrian Cadbury bequeathed £500,000 in his will to support the new building, which is already a vibrant place where students can relax, socialise and develop projects.



Breakthrough in brain-injury treatment

Each year, millions of people worldwide suffer strokes or traumatic head injuries, resulting in swelling to the brain. Caused by water entering the brain through a protein molecule (aquaporin-4), this swelling is known as ‘cytotoxic oedema’. It can lead to death, disability and an increased risk of neurodegeneration with ageing. A research project being led by Professor Roslyn Bill has discovered that an existing drug, currently used in healthcare to treat something completely different, dramatically reduces the number of these molecules, stopping water entering the brain and preventing swelling. This could save countless lives in future.



Find out more:
aston.ac.uk/alumni/make-a-gift/brain

Aston helps staff to support student mental health

Aston University is supporting a new national project, backed by funding from the Office for Students, to help university teaching staff support the mental wellbeing of their students. The £2million project, led by the University of Derby, in collaboration with Aston University, Kings College London, Advance HE and Student Minds, will focus on how curriculum design, teaching and assessment processes can have a positive impact on student wellbeing.

Professor Graham Harding was one of the nation's life-savers

A professor of clinical neurophysiology from Aston University has been recognised for his exceptional contribution to keeping the nation healthy. Professor Graham Harding (below, left), who passed away peacefully in October 2018, aged 81, was a neuroscience pioneer who developed the Harding flash and pattern analyser used to test video content for flashing and stationary patterns which may cause harm to those who suffer from photosensitive epilepsy. Professor Harding was early to recognise the dangers of certain material broadcast on television and used in video games. He drafted the original Office of Communications' (Ofcom) guidelines and became a consultant adviser to the Broadcast Advertising Clearance Centre on photosensitivity and televised material. He was also amongst the first in the UK to realise the potential of magnetoencephalography (MEG). In 2000 he led a successful Wellcome Trust bid to secure the UK's first whole-head MEG system. As part of Universities UK's MadeAtUni campaign he was named as one of Nation's Lifesavers – the top 100 individuals or groups based in universities whose work has made a life-changing difference to our health and wellbeing.



‘Stained glass’ technique kills deadly hospital bacteria

Scientists at Aston University have discovered a technique similar to medieval stained glass-making that can completely eradicate the deadliest hospital infections within hours. Using a so-called bioactive phosphate glass containing small amounts of the metallic element cobalt, the researchers were able to achieve a “complete kill” of the deadly bacterial infections *E.coli* and *Candida albicans* (a fungal infection associated with surgery), as well as a near-complete kill of *Staphylococcus aureus* (the drug-resistant form is known as MRSA). Lead researcher, Dr Richard Martin (a reader of Material Physics in the School of Engineering & Applied Science), said the findings had significant implications, offering the possibility of cheap, antimicrobial implants and coatings to combat the most common sources of infections associated with medical care.



Recruitment giant funds medical scholars

Meriden-based Pertemps, a recruitment agency with over 200 offices across the UK, is helping to fund four medical students as part of Aston's 50-50 Scholarship Campaign. The initiative targets hard-to-reach communities with the eventual aim of placing local students in medical careers in the West Midlands region and beyond. Looking back to the first year's achievements, chairman Tim Watts commented: “It gives our business enormous pleasure to support students from diverse backgrounds and we are of course delighted to see that they are making great progress. Pertemps has a strong relationship with Aston University and regard them as pioneers in so many areas of study and research. Seeing the students today, and hearing about their personal achievements and future ambitions, has been a source of tremendous pride and we all wish them the very best as they continue their studies over the next four years.”

Aston helps digital intelligence firm win top training award

A digital intelligence firm has won the prestigious Princess Royal Training Award through partnering with Aston University. Majestic.com, which supplies link intelligence data to the digital marketing industry, was one of a small selection of companies that were commended for their outstanding training and skills development programmes and their ability to generate exceptional commercial benefits. The company, based in Birmingham's Innovation Campus, was chosen as one of 48 winning companies for its innovative and rigorous training scheme for talented students.



Aston University and Wesleyan join forces to support less advantaged youngsters

A partnership between Aston University and Wesleyan is supporting young people from less advantaged backgrounds into medicine and providing development opportunities and project funding to students, employees, and partners of both organisations. Wesleyan is a financial services mutual focussed on supporting doctors, dentists, teachers and lawyers, and has a strong corporate responsibility ethos. It is passionate about developing growth and prosperity in the region and improving access to higher education. The five-year partnership with Aston provides an annual subsidy for University projects that support enhancements in the fields of health, education, social development and innovation. This year marked the first intake of Wesleyan scholars into the Medical School and the first member of Wesleyan staff to complete an Executive Apprenticeship MBA with Aston. Zak Gurhan, a medical scholarship recipient, said “As well as the financial help, receiving the scholarship has made me feel really proud and happy. It made me feel encouraged to do my best and to keep working hard. It feels good that someone has invested in me. I feel very lucky to be studying medicine at Aston.”



Follow Aston University on WeChat 微信

Aston has an official WeChat page where you can keep up-to-date with your university, whether you live in Birmingham or Beijing. Scan the QR code above to get updates in Chinese on all the latest news and events.



‘Grandparent getaways’ are good for the health

With an ageing population in the UK, there are now more great-grandparents than ever before and Aston research is being used to promote a type of holiday dubbed the ‘Great Grandparent Getaway’. It will benefit several generations of family members and is aimed at improving health and wellbeing. The Director of the Aston Research Centre for Healthy Ageing (ARCHA), Dr James Brown (above), who is also a Biogerontologist from Channel 4's *Old People's Home for 4 Year Olds*, has been supporting Parkdean Resorts, UK, to reveal why we should consider a four-generation holiday. “A four-generation getaway can kick-start the process of improving mood, enhancing memory, bettering physical function and reducing loneliness in older adults,” he said. “All of these benefits can help to slow down elements of age-related decline.”



Xenia Zhang:

“ASTON IS MY LUCKY PLACE”

By Richard McComb



There was a look of disbelief on the faces of family and friends when Xenia Zhang (BSc Communications Engineering, 2008) proudly announced her plan to pursue a career as a globe-trotting gourmet. Armed with her degree from Aston University, a suitcase full of ambition, and boundless reserves of energy, Shanghai-based Zhang dreamed of turning her love of fabulous food and drink into a successful business.

Talk of such a project may have been greeted with an encouraging smile in the UK, but for a young woman in mainland China this was uncharted territory. What was she thinking?

“Ten years ago, there was no such job as ‘Gourmet and Traveller’ in China. Lots of people didn’t understand me,” recalls Zhang.

“As my family had spent so much money to send me abroad to study, most people probably thought it would be better for me to stay in a safe zone, get a job in an international company, and get married.

“But for me, as Xenia, I think you only live once. If I didn’t do the things I really loved, I might have a lifetime of regrets.” ▶

Fast-forward more than a decade to 2019 and Zhang – founder, producer and host of Green Pepper and Red Pepper food and travel show - can reflect on a whirlwind career that has seen her film in more than 16 countries and 51 cities. When Aston in Touch tracked her down for an interview, Zhang was flying out on another gastronomic mission, this time to Puglia in Italy for a film project.

The focus of her show has broadened to include wider culture and travel content, but her passion for, and belief in, the power of food to create positive life experiences is what drives her.

Zhang says: “Food is more than just food. Food is a gift from nature, and coupled with the diligence and wisdom of local people, it is transformed into something delicious. Food becomes part of us and who we are. It helps to define us.

“Travelling around the world, visiting different regions and trying different cuisines, we can learn about their culture and traditions from the local natural environment, eating habits and cooking methods. It’s a wonderful thing. In particular, I love to listen to local people as they tell the story of food.”

It is the emotional attachments and gestures implicit in lovingly prepared dishes, rather than recipe complexity and elaboration, which matters most, according to Zhang: “For example, Shanghai’s classic dessert of glutinous rice dumpling in sweet rice wine always reminds me of grandma’s gentleness and virtue. My grandmother liked cooking for me since childhood. Even if the future years change and visual memory fades gradually into black and white, childhood taste-memory will inevitably stay bright and full of colour.”

Zhang’s time at Aston was hugely influential in shaping her career, and she praises the University for championing an outward-looking, international perspective.

“I had classmates and neighbours from South Africa, Japan, France and India. This experience taught me one thing: it’s like a Zen culture – everything in the world is equal. No matter where that person is from, we should treat them the same and love everyone and everything with our heart completely.”



Zhang picked up “real world” retail experience with part-time work at the House of Fraser and Selfridges stores in Birmingham; she boosted her communications skills – and let off steam – by joining the University basketball team, and learned the movements of hip hop dance.

When it comes to writing about food and travel, she has no doubt that Aston is her “lucky place”. Zhang finished a novel at university, sent the manuscript to magazines in China and subsequently won writing commissions looking at the student experience in the UK. The work gave her confidence and new ideas for content distribution, leading to her setting up Green Pepper and Red Pepper. She has also written a book about Taiwanese food and articles for airline magazines.

Her latest project involves filming in the Top 10 Happiest Countries in the world – seven down and three to go at the time of writing.

“The best part of my job is the opportunity for new experiences and learning,” says Zhang. “I think we never stop learning. After graduating, I learned drama, hosting, piano, wine knowledge, coffee culture and business knowledge. I will always be a sponge, eager to absorb knowledge. Aston helped me to become a better person.” ■

“I think you only live once. If I didn’t do the things I really loved, I might have a lifetime of regrets.”

”

Five Questions for...

GOCOMPARE CEO MATTHEW CRUMMACK

Matthew Crummack graduated from Aston University in 1993 with a degree in International Business and French. In addition to GoCompare, he has worked with many leading brands including lastminute.com, Expedia, Nestlé, and Procter & Gamble. He also sits on Aston University’s Business Board, where he helps to bring successful alumni back into contact with the Aston community.

Aston in Touch: What sorts of activities do you generally undertake as a member of Aston’s Business Board?

Matthew Crummack: In general, I am on the lookout for Aston graduates who ended up doing interesting things in their personal and/or professional life. They will have achieved a particular goal which makes them noteworthy as an example or a role model both to Aston’s current students but also to Aston graduates. I end up spending time trying to connect those people back into the University.

AiT: How did GoCompare’s degree apprenticeships [where students can combine university study and a paid job] in partnership with Aston come about?

MC: The inspiration came from one of the founders of GoCompare, Lee Griffin, who left school when he was 17 or 18. He went straight to work at a local business and subsequently helped to found confused.com and GoCompare.com. He has done very

well in life, yet he hated school and hated education. We lack great talent locally that is supported outside of school and within the business, notably in digital engineering and mathematical functions. The partnership with the University really helps us to take people who otherwise might not have had this opportunity to come into the business and to grow over a number of years.

AiT: What type of person would be an ideal candidate for Aston’s Business Board?

MC: Someone who expects nothing back from the work other than a sense of achievement that you are helping your old university become stronger and leave a better legacy. It is less about giving advice and more about opening doors to businesses and engaging them around talent acquisition, research, knowledge transfer partnerships and degree apprenticeships.

AiT: Given your multiple commitments, what would you say to similarly busy alumni who might want to volunteer for Aston, but might worry about the time commitment?

MC: They say that the busiest people get the most done. I get a lot out of meeting interesting and diverse individuals who have different experiences. It helps enrich my professional life and helps me to get a different view on what I might do with my own business. At a personal level I find that it helps me as an individual to become better. It requires you to be disciplined with time and perhaps use the time you might have gone for dinner or coffee breaks and just be a little bit more focused and efficient.

AiT: You’re a keen runner and recently ran the Newport Marathon as the character Gio Compario who fronts GoCompare’s advertising campaigns. What was it like running in a giant inflatable opera-singer costume?!

MC: It was like running in a giant roast-turkey bag! It was very hot, especially for the first half when the sun was out but I have to say the overwhelming support from the other runners and the spectators made the whole event a lot of fun. We raised some great money for NSPCC Wales in the process. A very fun day and I have forgotten all about the pain that I went through now, so that’s okay. I’ll do it again some time, no doubt.

Aston University is keen to work with organisations who would like to explore degree apprenticeships and executive education, and we can provide advice on using the apprenticeships levy. We’d also love to hear from those who could offer internships and placement-year roles for Aston students, or would like to undertake research.



To find out more about any of these areas please drop us a line at alumniinfo@aston.ac.uk.





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07



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02



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04



04

01. SportInspired visits campus

A trio of alumni from SportInspired (left to right: Richard Raynes, Courtney Laudat and Pete Thomond) revisited campus in March for a trip down memory lane.

02. Aston Global Celebration

On April 26th we launched our first international alumni celebration, marked by events across the world, including this gathering in Beijing, which was the first ever Aston Chapter to be formed.

03. Graduation wedding bells

It was a double celebration for Mishal Yaqoob (Human Resource Management & Business) when her partner, Shallum Sardar, popped the question in the marquee following her graduation ceremony in April.

04. Day of GO!

In November, Aston launched its crowdfunding platform, GO!, with a campus-wide event including student performances, tours, and a lunch for students and alumni (see p.42).

05. We Don't Need No Education

In January Pink Floyd fondly remembered a gig they played at Aston University exactly 51 years earlier, as a five-piece band.

06. Mark Smith photoshoot

In March Aston's Executive Director of Business Engagement, Mark Smith, took to the roof to be photographed by Edward Moss for Aston in Touch (see p.16).

07. New sculpture unveiled on campus

Alumnus Neil Lawson-May and his son Jamie visited in March to see the installation of a new sculpture (generously commissioned by Neil) by Estonian artist Marko Mäetamm.



When Arese Ugwu told her friends she was thinking about quitting her perfectly good job in finance so she could write online articles about money – and maybe publish a book – they thought she was mad.

CHEQUES

and the city

By Ben East

Arese Ugwu (BSc Business and Management, 2006) had a moment of self-doubt when she went to her local bookshop in Lagos with a box full of her debut to sell – and the owner would only take five. But those five copies of *The Smart Money Woman* sold immediately. The owner wanted more. So did the supermarkets Ugwu had begged to take a box. Her “financial-chick-lit novel” turned from being a word of mouth hit to a genuine bestseller in Nigeria – and, at the time of writing, shooting has just begun on a major 13-part television adaptation. “It’s *Sex and the City* for the African girl, but with financial literacy lessons,” laughs Ugwu. “When I went to Aston I thought I knew what I was going to end up doing... but being a co-executive producer on a TV drama and a novelist was not quite what I imagined! It’s just so fascinating how life plays out.” ▶

Ugwu's journey from Aston Business School to one of the most influential and interesting figures in financial advice in Africa is not only genuinely fascinating – but hugely encouraging too. After Aston, she went back to Lagos and began her burgeoning career in finance, got married and had a baby. And then everything changed.

“I was 27, I had a one year-old child, and my marriage fell apart,” she remembers. “It was really tough: in Nigeria you have to pay for rent two years up front; I had to buy new furniture, everything was so expensive. And at that point I starting thinking about women who weren't lucky enough to earn as much as me, or women who want to live a good life but do so from pay cheque to pay cheque, never really building assets that can protect them in the future. I instinctively knew that there was an audience of African millennial women who were struggling with the same issues I was.”

“Writing The Smart Money Woman as a fiction was a risk, but just preaching to millennials about money, saving for a rainy day and not spending money on fabulous stuff wouldn't have interested anyone,” she considers.

“It seemed to me that if I wrote something fictional which featured the kind of lifestyle people enjoy on Instagram, they'd be much more likely to see themselves and their friends in the characters – and engage with what I was trying to tell them.”

Which is, effectively, advice on how to compartmentalise life into sections that are adequately funded, and then ensuring that any wealth is built into assets rather than frivolously spent. It's all perfectly reasonable, practical stuff, but in Nigeria it was groundbreaking for the simple reason that, culturally, money isn't seen as a women's issue.

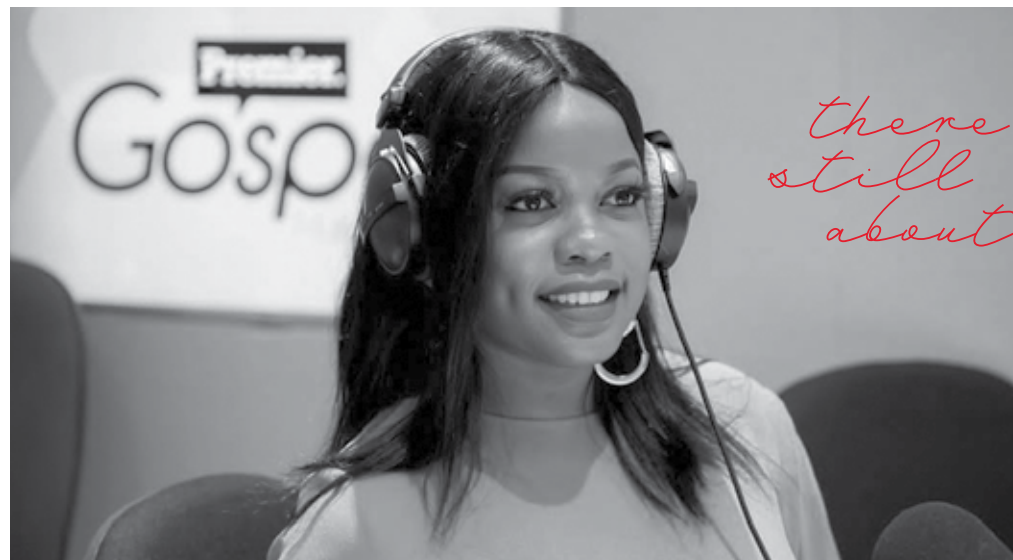
FIND YOUR PURPOSE

and make the most of opportunities

So Ugwu turned to blog posts. Her breakthrough article in 2014 was “A Chanel Bag Versus Stock Portfolio” for influential African lifestyle portal BellaNaija.com, and much of the thrust of the piece – “I LOVE Chanel bags and trips to Europe as much as the next person but I also have financial goals that demand that I invest today if I want to ‘Ball’ tomorrow” – eventually found its way into the vivacious character of Zuri in *The Smart Money Woman*. She finds herself struggling to pay the bills despite a salary which should make her comfortable, and re-evaluates her whole life after watching her friends navigate their way through their careers and marriages. To reinforce the messages in this enjoyable story, each chapter ends with a series of financial lessons and recommendations.

“There is a different mindset here,” she explains. “Making money and protecting a family's financial future is still seen as a man's job. Yes, women have become more entrepreneurial but culturally women are still thinking about their money in terms of spending rather than building and growing. Even if they bring a significant income to the family they're still thinking about making their homes more comfortable, extras for the kids, contributing to school fees and rent – but they don't think about building assets because that's the husband's job.”

Ugwu understands more than most how Nigerian women are more vulnerable to lifestyle change if they have no assets to protect them. But *The Smart Money Woman* has a lot to offer women across Africa and around the world about dealing with money. “The words might be different, but the ideas, dreams and barriers are often the same,” she says.



All of which has fed into the sequel to *The Smart Money Women*, published last April. *The Smart Money Tribe* explores how female friendship circles affect the way women spend and save their money, and how collaborative power can propel women to a new level in business and the boardroom.

“I want to smash this idea that when women get together, all they talk about is fashion, gossip and entertainment,” she says. “But there is still a secrecy about money – when I'm with my male friends they're constantly talking about what deals they're making, what they're investing in and their businesses.”

“So I think we need to understand female economic power can be achieved together rather than in personal silos; this book is about inspiring women to create their own money tribe, to see their friends as the board of advisors in their lives.”

The bookshop in Lagos will definitely take more stock this time, no doubt propelled by Ugwu's wide-reaching influence across traditional and social media. The latter barely existed when she was studying at Aston, of course, but it was the physical rather than digital network she made there which proved so valuable.

“I came from Africa and was used to seeing black people everywhere,” she remembers. “Aston really helped me to build a more diverse group of friends and experience other nationalities and cultures.”

“And I think that helped me look at life in a different way. It was a great time, and I loved it.”

Ugwu also says Aston made her incredibly disciplined and focused – which brings us back to the whole point of *The Smart Money Woman*. Zuri slowly learns to channel what she is good at into something worthwhile, and backs herself to make her life work for her financially.

“The book is about finding your purpose and making the most of the opportunities that come your way,” agrees Ugwu.

She has certainly done that. ■



To read more about Arese Ugwu and to order her books visit smartmoneyafrica.org or follow her on Twitter @smartmoneyarese



Meet the Exec



Photograph: Edward Moss

Mark Smith is Executive Director of Business Engagement at Aston University. He works in Birmingham and lives in Cornwall, where he has been a long-standing member of Agile on the Beach: a vibrant coastal conference that explores the latest practices around agile working.



Aston in Touch: What attracted you to working at Aston University?

Mark Smith: My connection with the University goes back to my teenage years when I was at school in Tamworth [in Staffordshire], and we were bussed over to metallurgy lectures on the premises at Aston. My first exposure to a university of any kind was to Aston University. The people at my school were all destined to work in engineering. I was really impressed by the fact that the lecturers were genuinely approachable. They gave us tea and biscuits, and they stayed and chatted about engineering, about metals, about austenitic steels and all these other things. I thought, “Wow, this is what university’s like”. I was about 14 and from that point onwards I decided I was going to go to university. Sadly, I didn’t come to Aston for a variety of reasons, but when the opportunity came to work here I was very proud to be able to join the team and I felt very privileged to be accepted into the executive.

AiT: It has always felt very friendly.

MS: I think it has. We talk about Aston’s reputation for widening participation. To be honest, that’s a modern term for what Aston has always done; it has always had a place in the community. It’s authentic. There are some lovely bits of the Main Building – parquet flooring and traditional brass handles.

They’re the kinds of things you might associate with ‘old’, but at the same time it’s a very modern university and it cares about the people who study here and about the businesses that surround it. It has always adapted to the changes in industrial and commercial patterns. I think there’s a warmth and affection for it in Birmingham. Although it doesn’t carry the name of the city any more, it carries the name of a district next to the city and it very much feels like the city’s university.

AiT: Tell me about Agile on the Beach.

MS: Agile on the Beach was set up by two friends of mine, Mike Barritt and Toby Parkins. Toby runs a software firm called Headforwards down in Cornwall and Mike was running and working in a consultancy firm called Oxford Innovation at the time. They came together because agile working methodologies – a decade ago – were not very present in Cornwall, nor was there a Cornwall software industry. I came in as a funder and as somebody running a developmental programme for executive education with Plymouth University called Unlocking Potential. I helped back the initial attendance of Agile on the Beach in a conference of about 60 people. In that ten years it’s grown enormously. We take over the Performance Centre of Falmouth University and it’s called Agile on the Beach because we are in Falmouth, which is a coastal town. ▶

AiT: Do you actually hold the conference on the beach?

MS: Yes, we take them all down to the beach where they can relax and just talk. For software we have many different tracks - team-building software, software craftsmanship, agile in business. We cover a whole range of different areas and we encourage people to come and share their practice. It's a community of interests, but people share a common interest in evolving or moving forward agile practices. Every year 450 people go away from Agile on the Beach having swapped ideas from different industries. It's a fantastically rejuvenating thing to do. I'm proud to have been involved in it since the inception, though I was not a founder of it. I've become someone who has helped build and grow it over that period and it's a really nice part of my life which appeals to my inner geek.

AiT: What do you think Aston does best in terms of business engagement?

MS: I do think it's very good at listening to the needs of businesses and it can react quickly. I think the most tangible example of that recently has been the growth of the cybersecurity degree from the Computer Science department. The degree has been supported across the University by different levels of expertise and people have engaged with a wide range of businesses to adapt and deliver it in very short order.

The best validation for this

approach has been the fact that as soon as it was advertised, there was an unprecedented flurry of applications. I don't want to give the false impression that we always move quickly because sometimes we are cautious, but I think, nonetheless, industry understands it can come and talk to Aston University. We can help businesses to deal with changing skills requirements, and we can help them understand what opportunities are out there.

AiT: How is the University progressing with degree apprenticeships?

MS: Really well. I think the nicest thing about degree apprenticeships is that they fit with Aston's core philosophy. As you know, almost three quarters of our courses have a placement of some kind associated with them. So learning at work has been part of Aston's reason to be - since the start. When the idea of degree apprenticeships re-emerged recently it was nice because it allowed us to take another route into doing what we're really good at. I think the challenge with degree apprenticeships is making sure that people still feel part of the University when they're in work. I think people need to be reassured that degree apprenticeship students are still part of that love, warmth and affection that carries itself around the University, even though they are working remotely four-fifths of the time. The degree apprenticeship way of teaching is remarkably flexible. The models that we use for degree apprenticeships in the UK could be used overseas as well, to provide support to people around the world. ■

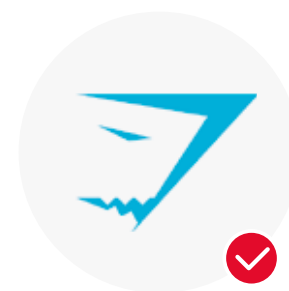
Mark Smith joined Aston University in 2018 from Birmingham City University where he was Director of Enterprise and Employability. His career has involved working across diverse areas including Government, regeneration and online education, taking on big projects including establishing new airports and fostering enterprise in inner-city areas.



GYMSHARK JUST KEEPS MOVING FORWARD

460k Follow

10m+ engaged followers



When Aston University student Chloe Lansbury started searching for a placement, she was looking for a chance to start putting theory into practice - somewhere where she could be creative and learn what she was getting into with her marketing degree. The last thing she expected was to be working for a sports clothing giant with ten million engaged social media followers, owned by former Aston student Ben Francis.





Gymshark HQ Garden ...



Gymshark HQ reception ...



Chloe on placement at Gymshark ...



Chloe and Ben ...



Gymshark HQ at night ...



Gymshark HQ interior ...



“I managed to get some work experience at Gymshark, mainly because I loved the brand and wanted to see what they were up to,” she explains. The Solihull-based company liked her so much that once the work experience was over, she had a placement offer on the table. “I knew that Gymshark would be where I could really grow, use my creativity and be given the freedom to learn in a dynamic environment.”

And it doesn't get more dynamic than Gymshark: one of the UK's fastest-growing companies. Founded by former Aston student, Ben Francis, its innovative clothing and accessories are snapped up by fitness enthusiasts across 131 countries. One of the secrets of its success is that, unlike older brands, Gymshark has tapped into a market driven by millennials who want well-fitted, handmade clothing that can be worn inside and outside the gym.

Ben himself has an extraordinary back-story. His grandmother taught him how to sew and he started out making all the clothes himself, working out of his parents' garage while juggling his degree at Aston and a job as a pizza delivery driver. Fast-forward seven years and Gymshark has a turnover of around £100m and has launched pop-up stores from Dublin to Los Angeles. Ben was recently added to Forbes' 30 Under 30 list and has overseen the company's move into impressive new premises on Blythe Valley Business Park (known affectionately as GSHQ). The headquarters comes complete with a café that always sells peri-peri chicken – because the brand was built on dinners at Nando's – and a gigantic logo in the grounds, which fans like to spot when flying in and out of Birmingham Airport.

“Now my relationship with Aston is more from a talent point of view,” says Ben from one of the company's meeting rooms (all of which are named for regions of Birmingham). “There's a bunch of placement students working at Gymshark and also people who went to Aston but now work here full-time.”

The company's social media has won them plaudits in the marketing world, but as Ben explains, the strategy has grown holistically along with the brand. “We've always done what came naturally to us and social media was somewhere we spent our time as kids so it felt natural to use it as a communication tool with the wider Gymshark family,” he says. Yet while other companies focus on Instagram and Facebook, Gymshark has turned weaknesses into strengths, adopting less-used channels such as Pinterest to launch new products, and this has allowed them to grow their social media following to a point where it competes with more established brands.

“Obviously we're an online brand, so I think sometimes it's quite hard to know if you want that product, because you can't touch and feel it,” Chloe explains. “On Pinterest we try to put across what the customer can't always access. That's what Pinterest is all about really. Trying to show fans the details and bringing them closer.”

Since starting her placement, Chloe has taken Gymshark's Pinterest presence to new heights. Originally the brand had under 100,000 followers (“Which sounds big, but it was actually not that big in comparison to Instagram”) with around three million unique views of the content per month. One day Chloe's boss asked her when they were going to get to ten million views per month. “It was pretty daunting,” she says, “but it went up to nine million, dropped to seven and then rose to ten...” At the time of writing Gymshark's Pinterest page has over 450,000 followers.



£100m

—
Gymshark turnover

131

—
Number of countries where Gymshark clothing and accessories are bought

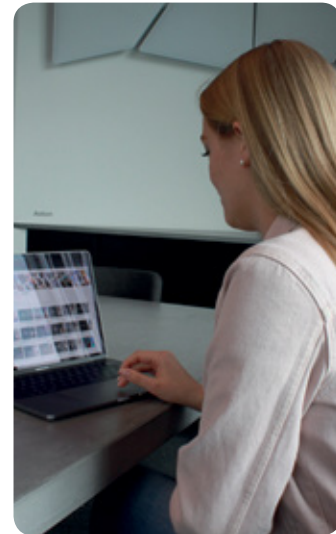


To find out more about offering a placement or internship please visit: aston.ac.uk/recruit.

Chloe also looks after Gymshark's LinkedIn page and has enjoyed being involved in the brand's events, where she has had been given the same level of trust as the permanent staff. “We did a workout event in Birmingham, which was great, but then I've also had crazy opportunities like a PR event in Los Angeles.”

For Ben, having Aston placement students on-board has been a positive experience, not least because they help the brand to stay connected to its fans.

“First and foremost, we learn a lot,” he says. “I'm 26 now and people don't realise how quickly you grow up and you feel old compared to uni students. The generation that's younger will act in slightly different ways – whether it's their taste, whether it's the way they use social media or the platforms that they use. So we end up learning a lot from placement students. And the thing that I really admire is that generally they're very ambitious and they have no fear, which is something that is really important to us here at Gymshark.” ■



Chloe Lansbury ...



THE LANGUAGE OF WORK

Dr Erika Darics of the School of Languages & Social Sciences is interested in how words create meaning and status in the workplace – and how we can all learn to be better communicators.

Work is how many of us spend the majority of our waking hours and the office is the site of collaboration with others; the place where we negotiate and establish our position in the hierarchy. For linguists, the way we communicate at work is not only fundamental to understanding the nature of what we do, it's key to how we perceive our value. Language influences the success of teams and has the power to raise or bring down corporations; it even impacts on our happiness.

Look at almost any job advert and you will see communication as a required skill. Employers are now beginning to realise its importance, and people like Dr Erika Darics, Senior Lecturer in Applied Linguistics at Aston University, are helping them to harness the power of language and translate it into positive action.

“

Much of the work that we do is intangible, so communication is our way of making sense of what we do; how we contribute; what the organisation is; how we belong.”

“With all the intensive knowledge work that we do, it can be hard to put your finger on the things you did during the day,” she explains. “The only way to make sense of your work and your contribution is through framing it – in other words, through talking about it. It's not as if a lot of us can show a piece of furniture and say: ‘This is what I made.’ Much of work that we do is intangible, so communication is our way of making sense of what we do; how we contribute; what the organisation is; how we belong. This is especially important given that teams are now very fluid, working across different spaces or countries.”

In these terms, a company can be seen not just as a building or an estate, or even the corporate strategy, but the sum-total of human interactions happening within its walls – past, present and future. ▶

“Even the very reality that we live in is constructed through social interactions and those happen in communication. We make sense of our reality and our worth through communicative acts. The way we talk may shift focus onto certain things more than others, and those ‘frames’ can change your work from being perceived as just part of the everyday grind to a very important contribution. The way both the company talks to you about this, and the way that teams talk amongst themselves, will affect how individual workers perceive themselves.”

Dr Darics undertakes a lot of her research in companies, as an objective observer of language and its effect on working cultures. At the time of writing she is engaged in a project with a charity who wants to understand why its fundraising team is not hitting targets.

“They thought it was to do with their corporate communication efforts. It was very clear in their brief that they thought it was because they’re not using Twitter or emailing effectively,” she explains. “The moment I started asking questions and probing, the reasons came out clearly. The new leader kept talking about structure and about how everybody should know their place, and that the team should function like a machine, whereas the team kept referring to being part of a family. If you think about your work in the frame of a machine, then your focus is on efficiency.



If you think about your work in a family frame, efficiency is not the main thing here, but caring for each other; working together. If you have these two deep cultures clashing it will numb the team down and prevent them from working effectively.”

Even in the context of email, we signal things without meaning to. Consider the collapse of the Enron Corporation in 2001. As a result of its unethical business practices, the Federal Energy Regulation Commission seized the email folders of 151 high-ranking Enron employees and released them online, simultaneously creating the largest, searchable email corpus in America’s history. This wealth of data has been dissected by hundreds of researchers, providing insight into, among other things, formal and informal communication in the workplace. One study found that only six per cent of emails sent by Enron staff had any greeting, but those with friendly greetings were most likely to be sent by women in junior positions, followed by men in junior positions. Powerful men seemed just to open an email window and start typing, often with the word: “Guys”.

Language choices can be so revealing. But in Dr Darics’ view, when it comes to studies of communication, you can’t separate the online world from the real one.

“How do you draw a line between an email you send to colleagues sitting next to you and then verbally adding something? Where does one start, and where does the other end? It’s more that our ways of interacting have broadened out. The problem is that for many channels online we don’t have established conventions and there are more possibilities of misunderstandings arising.

“The important thing to understand with online communication is that there are more resources of meaning there. For example, if you are used to receiving an email from your boss that ends with, ‘Best,’ or, ‘Thanks,’ and a signature, and then an email pops up and says, ‘Kind regards.’ You’re bound to read something into that. Because the pattern has changed you will assign meaning to it and think ‘What have I done?’”

Good communication rests on a solid foundation of shared meanings. The problem, explains Dr Darics, is that communication is so complex that you can’t have a tick-list to improve your approach – you have to be able to adapt to changing circumstances.

“If you want to become a more effective communicator what is more important is to understand the basic principles and to be a good listener and observer,” she adds. “If you understand how language works, you have a toolbox to choose from, and you know how to position yourself so that the people you meet get the impression of you that they should.” ■



Dr Erika Darics is a Senior Lecturer in Applied Linguistics at Aston University and the author of [Language in Business, Language at Work \(2018\)](#).



If you are spending thousands on communication or cultural training in your business and nothing seems to change, Dr Darics can provide consultancy or training, please get in touch with the alumni office in the first instance on alumniinfo@aston.ac.uk.

You can follow Dr Darics on Twitter @LinguaDigitalis.

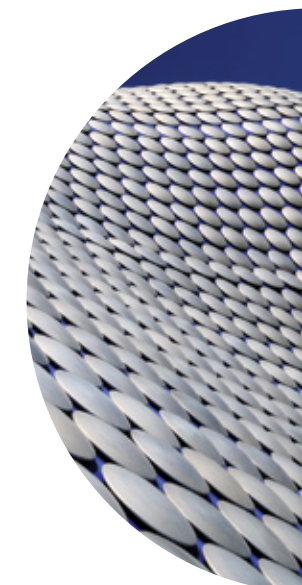
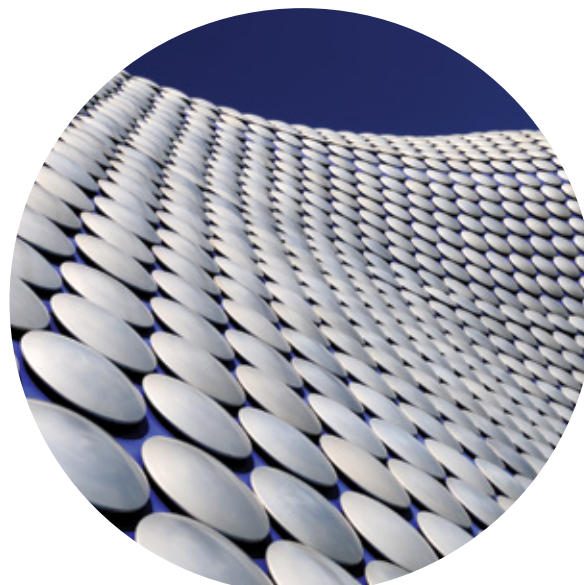
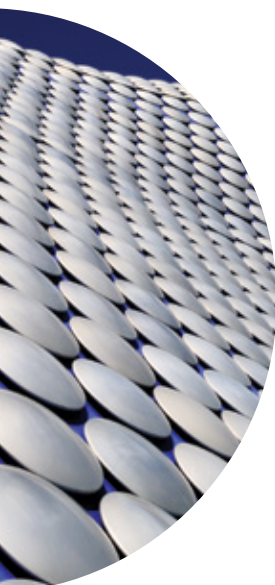


Even the very reality that we live in is constructed through social interactions and those happen in communication. We make sense of our reality and our worth through communicative acts."



IS ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE THE FUTURE OF ENERGY?

By Anna Blackaby



For shoppers at Birmingham's Bullring, it's the place to get their hands on the latest fashions. But Tom Anderson of Aston University artificial intelligence spin-out Grid Edge sees the shopping centre, with its iconic silver-studded Selfridges building, slightly differently.

For him, the Bullring is not just a building, it's also a giant battery – even if it's a battery where you can buy a pair of jeans. Turn on the heating at the right time, for example, and you can use the building's capacity to store and release that heat, helping the temperature stay comfortable and keeping costs and carbon emissions as low as possible. "It's the same functionality as a battery – consume power at one point in the day and use it later on," says Anderson.

But as everyone knows, the great British weather and the great British public behave differently every day so conditions inside constantly fluctuate. That means it's not always easy to pinpoint the best time to switch the heating or cooling on to exploit the building's battery-like qualities.

"We're trying to give them that predictive insight into what's going to happen next so they can do something clever about it"

This is where Grid Edge's clever number-crunching comes in.

Grid Edge is a true Aston University baby – part-owned by the University and with financial backing from several Aston University alumni. The firm believes artificial intelligence (AI) is not just for the big energy players – the consumer should get a slice of the benefits too. "That's what makes us different," says Anderson.

Energy users have been the focus right from its inception at Aston University's European Bioenergy Research Institute (EBRI), where its cofounders Tom Anderson, Jim Scott and Dan Wright became friends. "We were interested in how you could apply machine learning, AI and optimisation methods – basically complicated maths – to help consumers in the energy system create more value, do a better job and be more empowered to take part in that energy system," says Anderson.

For each client, Grid Edge pulls together a vast pool of data on everything from temperature inside and out, the angle of the sun, wind

speed, footfall, car park activity and any other relevant information. In the case of the Bullring for example, local football fixtures can have a big impact on how people plan a Saturday afternoon's shopping in Birmingham.

Armed with all this data, Grid Edge's AI technology can then predict what is likely to happen in the day ahead. By zooming in on past days with matching conditions, a building manager can plan what to do similarly – or differently – to maximise comfort and minimise cost and carbon emissions. "We're trying to give them that predictive insight into what's going to happen next so they can do something clever about it," says Anderson.

On the other side of the meter, energy suppliers and grid operators face major challenges, especially as more renewables come in. They aim to avoid the peaks and troughs of energy supply and demand that could lead to harmful surges or blackouts.

With its focus on energy customers, Anderson believes Grid Edge is ideally placed to help clients take advantage of this need for stability,

transforming them from passive consumers into active players. "There is a multibillion-pound market in the UK to try and balance the grid and it will become more and more important as we go through this decarbonisation," he says.

Grid Edge's predictive technology means building owners can be more flexible about when they consume power – and that is valuable to others in the system. Anderson predicts a shift towards a smarter energy ecosystem with tariffs fixed in real time according to the load on the wider network. Building owners will be able to check in with the grid and their energy suppliers to get the best prices by 'bartering' over when they switch their heating on that day, for example. "Our view is the customer should be the one calling the shots," says Anderson.

In a complex and connected energy market, knowledge truly is power. ■

"The Bullring is not just a building, it's also a giant battery – even if it's a battery where you can buy a pair of jeans.."

Grid Edge
photograph:
Edward Moss

MORE POWER TO HIS ELBOW

This year marks the bicentenary of the death of James Watt, whose ability to apply theoretical knowledge in practical ways is still celebrated at Aston University.



1: *James Watt* by Carl Fredrik von Breda, oil on canvas, 1792. Given by M.P. Watt Boulton, 1865. © National Portrait Gallery, London.

2: *Gilded statue of Boulton, Watt and Murdoch* by William Bloye and Raymond Forbes-Kings, courtesy of Adam Jones (Wikimedia Commons).

3: *James Watt* by Alexander Wilson, after Unknown sculptor, albumen carte-de-visite, 1860s. © National Portrait Gallery, London.

4: *James Watt's campaign chest*, courtesy of Aston University.

This year marks 200 years since Watt's death. He was a Scottish inventor, chemist and mechanical engineer who went into partnership with Mathew Boulton in 1775, making steam engines to pump water out of mines. His multiple talents as an engineer, inventor and entrepreneur make him an apt figure for Birmingham, and Aston University, which stands on the James Watt Queensway, and which counts engineering as one of its oldest subjects. Last year a team of specialists restored the world's oldest steam engine – the Smethwick Engine – designed by Watt under the auspices of Boulton & Watt. It was installed in 1779 on the Birmingham-Wolverhampton canal and saved water by pumping it back up a series of canal locks at Smethwick.

In November 2018 visitors to Thinktank, just across the road from campus, could see the historic engine operating again – almost 240 years after it first burst into life under Watt's hands.

Watt's improvements to the steam engine – by the introduction of a separate condenser – would revolutionise production and make it independent of water, wind, animal and human power. But he would also invent the first commercial copying machine and added to our knowledge of energy, gases and electricity. At the Science Museum in London his workshop has been lovingly reconstructed, exactly as it was left when he died in 1819,

comprising over 8,000 objects in their original cluttered arrangements. In the West Midlands, the Watt commemorations have been led by the Lunar Society: a modern incarnation of the 18th-century Society, which originally met for drink and conversation during the full moon (this was less romantic than it sounds: the roads were better lit during the full moon, making travel safer). Founded in 1766, it gathered together friends and prominent intellectuals, including Boulton, Watt, Erasmus Darwin, Joseph Priestley, Thomas Day, Josiah Wedgwood and others. Today the Society works with like-minded organisations in Birmingham and beyond to inform debate through events and initiatives, with a view to catalysing action and improving the region for the common good. The Society has for many years awarded a Lunar Medal to people who have added to the vigour of the West Midlands community. Fittingly, Aston University figures make up a good proportion of the recipients, including former Chancellor, the late Sir Adrian Cadbury; former Vice-Chancellor, Professor Dame Julia King; Professor of Clinical Science, Clifford Bailey and alumnus (and former Lord Mayor) Paul Sabapathy CBE.

Watt died in Birmingham in 1819 and was buried in the grounds of St Mary's Church, Handsworth – the expansion of the church over his grave now means that he lies within the building. Meanwhile, in Westminster Abbey he is commemorated by a statue, carved by the great Regency sculptor Francis Leggatt Chantrey. The inscription says that Watt “enlarged the resources of his country, increased the power of man, and rose to an eminent place among the most illustrious followers of science and the real benefactors of the world”. In 1908 a unit of electrical power was named in his honour. For Aston University, the real meaning of his genius was his application of scientific knowledge for the practical benefit of business and society. This is one of Aston's founding principles – and something that continues every day, beside the thundering traffic on the James Watt Queensway, in rooms across campus. ■

In an otherwise ordinary office in the Main Building is a piece of 18th-century furniture – a kind of filing cabinet known as a campaign chest. These pieces of furniture were so named because of their association with the military; they can be folded or broken down and taken on the march or even on ships. Aston's filing cabinet, however, has a special association: it belonged to the great industrialist James Watt, who probably bought it for the sake of convenience when he moved to Birmingham in 1774. The cabinet was originally bequeathed to the James Watt Memorial Institute in Birmingham but found its way to Aston University when the former institution closed.



Dr Jack Carnell is well known to staff, students and alumni as Head of the Engineering Systems and Management Group at Aston University. What is less known about him, however, is that he holds six degrees from Aston University, making him (probably) the most prolific Aston alumnus of all time.



DEGREES OF ASTON

Jack Carnell never intended to study at Aston at all, and certainly didn't mean to become a compulsive student. He left school in 1973 "with seven very poor 'O' Levels" and went to work in a bank. "I lasted about five weeks," he says. "I had to get out. I picked up a local paper, and there was a job as a trainee draftsman with the local water authority. One of the conditions of the new job was that I went to college."

“
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Dr Jack Carnell

Jack went to Brooklyn Technical College in Aldridge and signed up to do an Ordinary National Certificate in building construction. "I wasn't studious at all, but I ended up doing quite well. The senior lecturer came to me and said, 'Have you thought about going to university?'"

Jack applied to three universities, including Aston, though Lancaster had initially been a favourite. "I started a degree in civil engineering at Aston in 1976; the size of the programme was vast with hundreds of students." Jack opted for the four-year sandwich course, which involved a cycle of six months studying at university followed by six months in the workplace. At the end of the course he graduated with a First. He decided to stay on for a Master's degree but was determined to set himself apart in the job market.

"I was looking for something that would make me different to other students and chose a Master's degree in mathematics. This was 1980 – a time when a calculator cost a small fortune," he says. "There were no desktop computers. If you wanted to do anything analytical, you had to type out your own computer code on paper cards. As you can imagine, it was exhausting."

"I didn't really drink or 'party' as a student, so I was always sober! I was also initially unattached (I met my girlfriend, now my wife, Maria, in 1979) and just used to work, work, work. I became a compulsive student. Maria was hugely supportive and has been ever since. I wouldn't have got the degrees without her. The maths degree was so tough – the hardest thing I've ever done in my life."

It did make Jack different, however. Now 24 years old, he returned to the water authority and was quickly identified as the go-to person for mathematical problems. He became a resources manager, working on the company's demand forecasts. While the experience made a big difference to his 'brand', it was not without its problems. "It made me indispensable, but it also meant that I would never move into a management role." This became evident a few years later, when the company decided to send selected staff on a Master's course in Business Administration. Jack applied to the firm and was rejected.

"I went to see the HR Manager who said 'We see you as one of our technical people but not necessarily one of the future managers of the company.' So I said I'd go and get a job somewhere else. They relented and let me do the MBA."

The three-year part-time course was at Aston University's brand new Business School. Jack – now in his early 30s – passed and continued with his job. Despite taking a further four-month-long executive education course at Harvard Business School in 1995, he was not immediately promoted, so he undertook a part-time PhD in water resources planning to "stay busy". After a couple of promotions, by the end of the PhD in 1999 he was Deputy Managing Director, becoming Managing Director in 2004, a role he held for almost seven years.

But after all this time at the front of the firm he realised he needed a new challenge. "So, in 2010 I left a fantastic job. I went home and hunted around for something to do. I thought, 'I'm going to change my career completely. I'm still young enough.'"

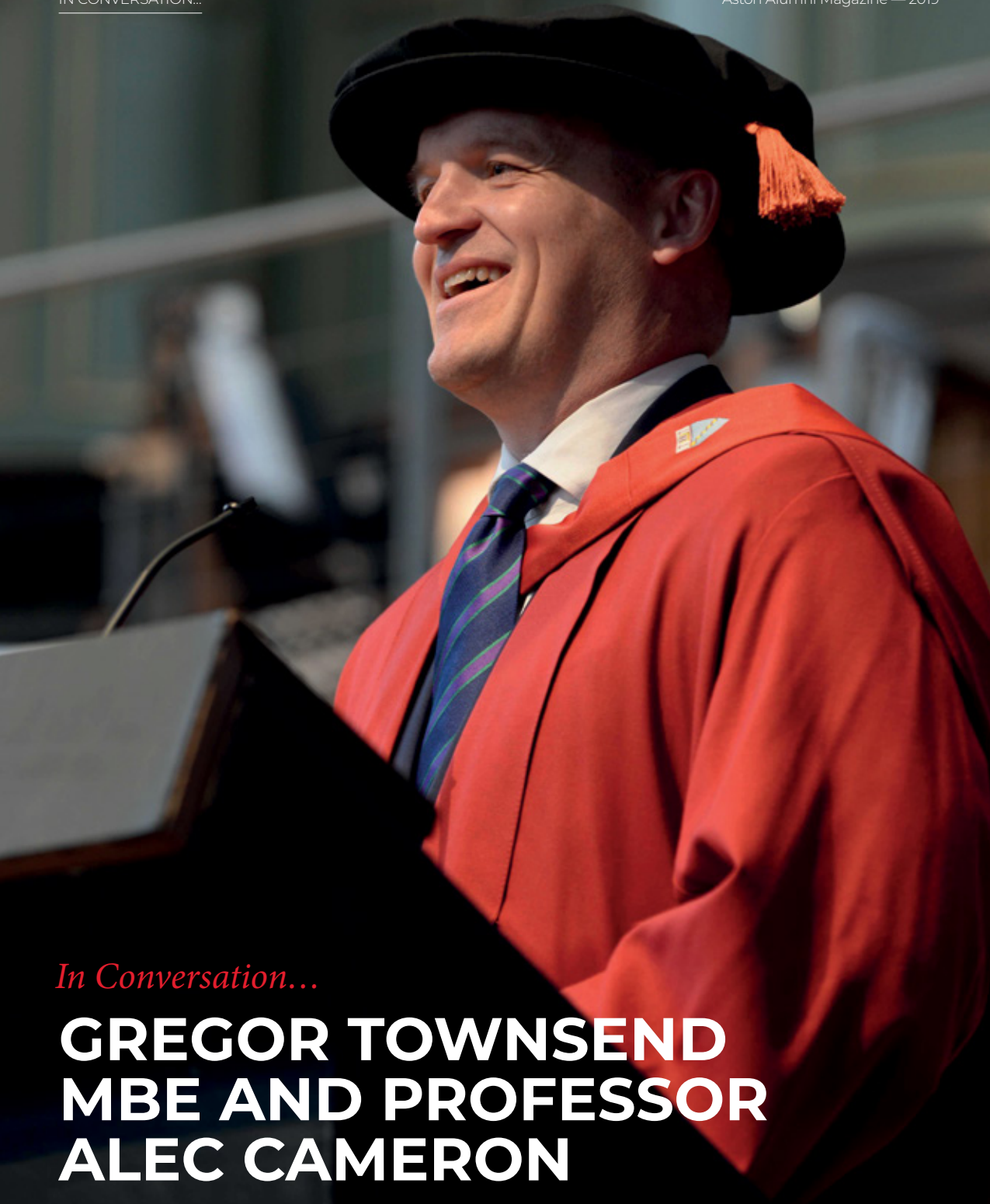
He chose to do an access course in Psychology by distance learning which got him onto the Psychology degree at Aston. Then he started his own company teaching neurolinguistics (NLP) courses and coaching. At the same time he undertook part-time teaching at Aston, which gradually snowballed into a lot more teaching.

Eventually Jack passed the Postgraduate Certificate of Education, followed by the Postgraduate Diploma, which led to a Master of Education degree at Aston University, Jack's sixth degree here, which he completed last year. He now teaches engineering leadership, research methods and a range of subjects.

"One of the advantages of having a broad range of academic qualifications is that I can teach widely," he remarks. "For me, Aston university is a theme park for bright-eyed clever students who you get to meet and teach. It's great fun. I suppose, unless someone's got seven degrees, I might have done the most degrees here."

And what if someone else were to come forward?

"I'd be delighted," he says with a laugh. "It'd give me some competition to go out and do another degree. Because, well, why not?" ■



In Conversation...

GREGOR TOWNSEND MBE AND PROFESSOR ALEC CAMERON

Photograph: Richard Battye

In April the head coach of the Scotland rugby team, Gregor Townsend (MBA, 2000), returned to campus to receive an honorary degree. He also caught up with Aston's Vice-Chancellor to talk about the game and how his studies at Aston have influenced his work.

Alec Cameron: Welcome back to Aston, Gregor, it's great to have you here today for the graduation ceremonies. I'm interested in exploring the links between your MBA here at Aston and the learnings you achieved from that and how they apply to the role you have as a professional rugby coach.

Gregor Townsend: Firstly, I really enjoyed the course. I was very interested in the management side of things – learning about the bigger picture of business and how the operations, the marketing, and financial side all work. Getting that basic education really helped me as I became a coach. I started as an assistant coach, but it became much more relevant when I became head coach of Glasgow Warriors, managing a staff and

different departments. You're in charge of signing players, of the succession planning, of making sure your budget is right. I definitely looked back on what I learned during my MBA at Aston University. At the time, it was great to go through that process of learning. Our game had just turned professional and it gave me a real balance in my life to have something I was very interested in and was able to do in my own time.

AC: Obviously, there's a significant amount of work involved in preparing a team for a test match in terms of selecting the players, analysing the opposition, developing the game plan, and then working out how to implement it. Without giving away too many secrets, what do you see as the key elements of planning for what happens on the field?

GT: I suppose there's two different forms of planning. There's the macro planning of what a season's going to look like when on a campaign. From our perspective, we have three campaigns throughout the year – the Six Nations, the summer tour and the November tests. And once every four years, we have the World Cup. There's a lot of work that goes in before you actually meet the players for your first session. And then there's the micro elements - meeting the players; the meetings you have with the coaches; the review of the game; the preview; the selection; what training sessions you're going to have. The key is to make sure that your players have clarity going into the game – clarity on how they're going to win and clarity on what they're expecting from you as a coaching group. And also, a key for me is to build a sense of optimism which will lead to success.

AC: I mean, despite all the planning and preparation, what we still see ('we' being the people who watch the games) is inconsistent performances from teams, right? Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't, although the planning and preparation has been meticulous. How do you try and manage out that variability which still seems to beset many of the great teams, with the exception, perhaps, of the All Blacks?

GT: Well, your plans are affected by what the opposition do. I think Mike Tyson used to have a quote: "Everybody's got a plan until they get punched in the face". Rugby's quite similar. The first tackle or the change of direction from what you were expecting from the opposition, and from your own team, then things might not go as well as you planned. You've got to prepare players for that, and how we do that is push them outside their comfort zone in training, to make it more relevant to what they're going to experience. And for us, as coaches, we need to step back. ▶



Photograph:
Edward Moss

As we get closer to the game we enable players to lead meetings, talk to each other and make decisions on the field. That should get us into a place where, if the unexpected does happen, players can come together and say, "Right, this is what we need to do next". Every game tells its own story. The last one we played was at Twickenham and we were 31 nil down after 30 minutes; getting that

back was a real credit to the players.

AC: Well, I was going to pick on that as a specific example. I'll assume it wasn't a cunning ruse by Scotland to lull England into a false sense of over-confidence by conceding a 31 to nil lead, but many people would want to know what was said in the changing rooms at half-time which enabled the team to come out from a, by then, 31 to seven deficit and retain the Calcutta Cup with a

historic 38-all draw. There's that sense of the role of the coach as the manager, the leader. Is it about the psychological approach or is about going back to fundamentals; getting people to focus on what needs to be done?

GT: Yeah, it was going back to the fundamentals, exactly. At times it can be the emotional side, and that's when, maybe, a coach or a captain can be angry and appeal to that change of behaviour on the field through a psychological or emotional change. But on that day, it was actually a calm changing room. My assistant coaches were doing a great job of just talking about how we have to improve in certain areas. We talked about winning the second half and the process of doing that, and that sparked something because it allowed us to get a foothold in the game. Then our players were outstanding. It was not just their execution of the game plan, but much more than that – the fact that they got confidence through scoring a try.



The 2019 Rugby World Cup takes place in Japan from September 20th to November 2nd.

They were the ones taking the game to England, and that's the wonderful thing about sports – no game follows exactly what people predict. To finish up a 38-all was something I've never experienced as a player, and in a stadium like Twickenham, where we'd never won since 1983. It was great to see.

AC: Clearly there's a lot of interest in professional sport, rugby included, and there's a lot of external pressures on players. As we know, the Australian Rugby Union cancelled the contract of their star player, Israel Folau, for sharing his personal views on social media. How do you try and manage those external distractions on the team in terms of giving players appropriate freedoms, but also recognising there's a clear interest which needs to be managed and respected?

GT: Yes, well, social media is an important element in life, but in sport, it's a double-edged sword. It can be a real positive in connecting your supporters more closely with the team. I know our marketing department loves the use of social media, and it's led to us selling out our last 14 games at BT Murrayfield. On the other side, the interaction isn't always positive. I think you either set rules and you're very strong on what players can and can't do, or you give them the knowledge of what is acceptable, what is unacceptable, and what you trust them to do. That's a route we would take. We continually have to update it because there's always examples throughout the world of people using social media and getting called out, sometimes unwittingly. We believe that updating our players with the perils and the pitfalls of social media and how to act – in the context of keeping their freedoms and a certain amount of trust – is the best way to do things.

AC: Well, thanks Gregor for coming back to Aston. Congratulations on your honorary degree, and best wishes to Scotland for the World Cup in Japan later this year.

GT: Thank you very much. It's a great honour. It's been 21 years since I've been here, and it's a huge privilege to be back and get this award. Thank you. ■

**TWO
TAKES
ON**

**ASTON IN
1981**

TAKE ONE

Professor Malcolm Stevens OBE, FRS (then Professor of Experimental Cancer Chemotherapy at Aston University).

Professor Stevens, who headed up the Pharmacy Department from 1983 to 1989, was part of a team of scientists at Aston who developed the revolutionary cancer drug, temozolomide.



Professor Malcolm Stevens OBE

The Vice-Chancellor of Aston, Dr Joseph Pope, retired from his office in September, 1979 and was replaced by Professor Frederick Crawford in July 1980. Crawford (Fred) had previously studied part-time at Aston when it was a College of Technology. He was an entirely different character from the avuncular and popular Pope, being a formidable intellect, but completely lacking in any 'touchy-feely' qualities. (But then being cuddly is not necessarily a characteristic one looks for in a V-C.) Crawford had previously been Chairman of the Institute for Plasma Research at Stanford University in California and on arrival he articulated an ambition to transform Aston into a quality-driven institution – the Stanford of the UK no less. He started well by consulting all constituencies of the University and set up many task forces to scrutinise all aspects of the past performance of departments and their plans for the future; he also made a point of emphasising that an advanced IT status was to be a feature of the new Aston and warned that special care had to be taken in appointing new staff, as errors of judgement made at that critical stage could take decades to pass through the system. All these imperatives were enthusiastically welcomed by the staff – initially.

During 1981 there were intimations that an era of cuts was looming for the university sector – 'the quinquennium of the python' as Crawford later described it – and advised all heads of departments to prepare for major funding reductions. True enough, on 1st July 1981, Aston's day of infamy, the Universities Grants Committee (UGC) levelled a cut of 30% plus from its recurrent grant, reduced the funded places for the home student population by a commensurate amount, and removed all funding for overseas students. The former CATs [Colleges of Advanced Technology] across the sector, such as Salford, Bradford, Heriot-Watt, all institutions of which I had a personal and fond knowledge, were particularly mauled in this cull, despite their degree programmes focussing on the very science and technology disciplines that the Government sought to encourage. To make matters worse the numbers of funded pharmacy students were cut nationally, responding to earlier crass advice from our own Pharmaceutical Society that too many pharmacists were joining the profession.

To coincide with a debate on Higher Education, especially the treatment of Aston by the UGC, I joined a delegation of Aston staff to lobby ministers in Parliament on the 23rd July 1981. The debate was notable for

the trenchant criticisms levelled at the Government by the fiery Tam Dalyell, MP for West Lothian. Dalyell pointed out that some 88% of Aston's graduates were studying engineering, science and management and only 12% social and human studies. He also noted that Aston was at the time top of the league table for graduate employment and clearly targeting its programmes to the needs of industry and commerce which is 'where our bread and butter lie'. Several local Birmingham MPs weighed in to the debate but it was observed that only 15 members were present in the House. Bruce George (Walsall) commented that if Oxford or Cambridge had been cut to the same extent the entire chamber and galleries would have been packed. I presented a bunch of woody nightshade, which I had picked from a clump growing along the canal towpath on one of my runs round the Spaghetti Loop, to Dr Rhodes Boyson, the Under-Secretary for Education, Science and Technology. Unfortunately I couldn't find any *Atropa belladonna*, the related deadly nightshade. My bouquet had lots of berries which contain solanine, an alkaloid which is claimed to increase bodily secretions and lead to vomiting and convulsions. That would have done nicely, but in a contemptuous gesture he flung my botanical offering into a bin in his office."

This extract is taken from Professor Stevens' memoir, The Kestrels of Gosta Green (2019). Copies can be obtained from Aston University's alumni office and proceeds go towards the Regius Chair in pharmacy (please email alumniinfo@aston.ac.uk for details).



Aston prospectus cover from the 1980s.

TAKE TWO



Sir Adrian Cadbury, CH, DL (then Chancellor of Aston University, a post he took up in 1979).

Sir Adrian helped to steer Aston through a challenging political landscape in the 1980s and was a popular and respected figure in the University's life. After stepping down as Chancellor in 2004, he continued his close relationship with the University, helping to shape campus through his philanthropy, until his death in 2015.

Firstly, I was invited to join the Council of Aston, and from there I succeeded Lord Nelson as Chancellor. Having been on the Council I understood the working of the organisation. I very much admired Aston's early leaders. Sir Joseph Hunt I got to know very well; he was self-taught and a remarkable man. And Peter Venables, the first Vice-Chancellor, and his wife, Ethel, were great figures. I knew George [Nelson, Aston's first Chancellor] because we were both involved with the Confederation of British Industry. He was a very good engineer but also a very good administrator and was able to represent the University in public life.

There is no official job specification for a Chancellor. It's an opportunity to become involved and to assist where you can – there are no requirements in terms of making decisions. But [in 1981] there were sudden cuts made on the universities and, in my view, Aston was very wrongly affected. First of all the cuts were limited to a small number of institutions, nearly all of which were the newest. I can't remember all of the figures but the Vice-Chancellor [Sir Frederick Crawford] had to slim the staff by pretty near a third, which is a horrendous task. I felt there was a need to speak up about the impact of the cuts to the Confederation of British Industry, which had supported the Government. I appealed to the Minister, who was Sir Keith Joseph, to plead for some alleviation in the way it was carried out. ▶

"I wasn't successful, but Sir Frederick – faced with this situation – did a remarkable job." Reducing the staff to the extent that was required resulted in a shoal of letters from academic institutions saying that what was being done at Aston was challenging the independence of academics. What I could do was at least attempt to respond to some of those criticisms. I wrote something like 400 letters and tried to take some of the load of the academic outcry.

The other thing was... I was somebody to whom the Vice-Chancellor could talk in confidence about the awful decisions that he had to make. So what normally would be a fairly honorary position became one where there was an opportunity to help – on two fronts." ■

This extract is from an interview carried out in November 2014 for an article to mark the 50th anniversary (in 2016) of Aston's receipt of its Royal Charter.



Sir Frederick Crawford, Vice-Chancellor 1980-1996.

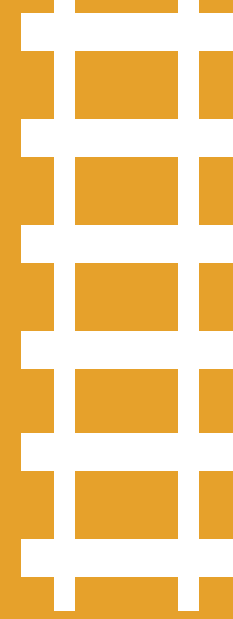


The Right Hon. The Baroness Thatcher (then Prime Minister) and her husband Dennis visiting Aston Science Park in 1983.



MAKING A GAME OF RAIL DISRUPTION

For commuters, stranded on the way to work, it can be hard to have any sympathy for rail operating companies. Yet Professor Ben Clegg and colleagues from Aston Business School have developed a novel solution to help frontline staff to provide a better service.



It's 8am on a Monday and your train has broken down. You are now late for an important meeting with your boss. As crowds form at the customer information desk and people take to Twitter to vent their frustration, nobody thinks much about the rail staff who must provide accurate information and practical alternatives at enormous speed. Rail companies are measured on customer care via the National Passenger Rail Survey, so a failure to help does eventually have an impact on business, and consistently bad service will end up being reported to the Rail Delivery Group: a self-policing unit of the Government which controls train operators.

“Rail operators can plan perfectly, but things always happen. It snows or there are landslides. There are floods, there are fires, there are fatalities. Trains break down. That's just life,” says Professor Ben Clegg. As the head of the Operations and Information Management Department at Aston Business School, he sees rail disruption as less of a headache and more of a fascinating problem. “What the rail industry is predominantly trying to do is to move metal boxes around a network to be in the right places at the right times. And passengers are somewhat secondary to all that. They just get on the metal boxes or they don't. It's up to them, but that's not really the spirit of running a quality service.”

Quite often people come up to staff on a platform and show them what is happening on social media and they might have more up-to-date information because social media can sometimes move more quickly than the company's information systems

In association with Chiltern Railways, the Rail Safety and Standards Board (RSSB), Focus Games Ltd. and colleagues at Aston Business School, Professor Clegg has come up with a novel solution: to make a game out of rail disruption. Fashioned like a traditional boardgame “like you get for Christmas”, but with an added video element, The Rail Disruption Game is designed to help frontline rail staff give better advice during times of upheaval.

“As you know, if you've been in a rail disruption, you don't know what's going on and you just think, ‘I'm going to find someone and ask them.’ And of course, everyone has the same idea, and there's three people at Marylebone Station and a thousand angry passengers approaching saying ‘What's happening?’ Those staff are under enormous pressure because things are always changing. They're told something, and ten minutes later it's not true anymore.

And then they get a frustrated traveller shouting at them. We wanted to try to help them give the best advice at any particular time.”



There is, says Professor Clegg, very little research in this area because the focus has traditionally been on efficiently moving trains around the network. He and his colleagues wanted to develop something that would help companies see things from the passengers' point of view, but they wanted a solution that was more interesting than a set of guidelines or a training manual. One of the issues with training rail staff is that they are located all over the country, so they also needed something portable. The Rail Disruption Game is small enough to be set up on a table in any station and the only technical requirement is a tablet device.

“The reason we've got this project is because we're specialists at making operations run better,” he explains. “The game is designed to help staff at railway stations, but there is also a social media element. Quite often people come up to staff on a platform and show them what is happening on social media and they might have more up-to-date information because social media can sometimes move more quickly than the company's information systems. However, the operator has people in control sitting at Banbury, who monitor social media and feed information to staff. We include that as part of the game.”



Ben Clegg is Professor of Operations Management at Aston Business School, has been Associate Dean for Enterprise and is currently Head of the Operations and Information Management Department.



He is open to enquiries about business collaborations and can be contacted on b.t.clegg@aston.ac.uk or +44(0)121 204 3063.

Although the game came out of an earlier research project looking at big systemic issues, the results have been very practical – providing Chiltern with a bespoke training package and staff with the opportunity to experiment with different situations and to share best practice in a risk-free environment. Initially, Aston ran six courses and trained up a facilitator but then the Rail Disruption Game was handed over to the company, who now run it in-house. The game has been enthusiastically received by players and, in addition to the benefits to employees, it has also delivered a great number of improvement suggestions which will undoubtedly benefit the rail operator.

In the future Professor Clegg hopes to apply similar solutions to different systems. “The same mechanics of the game could be used in logistics companies and other transportation companies, such as airlines,” he says. “But we hope that all train operating companies in the UK – and beyond – will be able to use something like this for training in the future.” ■



There's always been a lot more to Aston student life than lectures. Whether joining clubs and societies, tinkering with their own technological ideas or dipping ambitious toes into entrepreneurial waters, what students get up to beyond the classroom often plays just as big a part in future success.

Get up and

Day of GO! 2018



Photographs: Richard Battye

Now Aston University is helping more students to make the most of these opportunities. A brand new, student-driven crowdfunding platform called GO! allows individuals and teams to generate funds for their brightest ideas, using their own social networks. This online tool, hosted by the University, lets students start their own funding webpage and handle every aspect of the project management and promotion themselves. Aston also provides the background support to ensure the donation processes are secure and easy to navigate, but the rest is up to them. Unsurprisingly, given Aston students' enthusiasm for innovation, it's proving to be a great success.

Crowdfunding has been around for a while, but it's still new to universities. The idea is a simple one. Rather than having to wait in line for grants or submit applications to committees and funding bodies, students can make direct approaches to those who they think will be most interested in helping their idea to become a reality, while social media enables them to promote the right project to the right people. Lots of interested parties making small philanthropic contributions has the potential to add up to big successes.



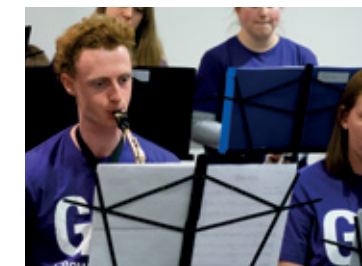
Photograph: Richard Battye

GO!

Aston University Music Society

One of the longest running societies at Aston, Aston University Music Society was desperately in need of a new drum kit. Using the platform has encouraged members to think bigger.

"We're over the moon that we've been able to afford a brand new whole kit and all the bags and cases we need. We never expected to raise so much money, we thought we were going to have to buy second hand, so we're thrilled" **Angharad Baines**, AUMS President 2018-19.

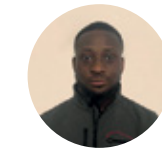


Aston Tennis Club

Because the University doesn't have its own tennis courts, the Aston Tennis Club (known as the Aston Bulls) was spending time and energy having to find funds for court-hire at a local venue. Its crowdfunding project raised enough in a month to guarantee court-hire costs for the rest of the year.

"The use of crowdfunding completely changed the outlook of the Aston Tennis Club last year. We were able to stop worrying about covering court hire and start planning events for our members! When you achieve your crowdfunding target it feels amazing and it is also a great thing to put on your CV to show that you tried to make a difference to your club/society."

Liam Cavanagh, Aston Bulls Tennis Club President 2018-19.



Faruk Ojikutu

Faruk was on the BSEEN programme where he worked on making his business idea (Mechanlink) a reality. Mechanlink is an app and website used to connect vehicle owners to mechanics in their area, making it easier to find reliable mechanics, get diagnoses, quotes and write reviews. Faruk started developing his app and decided to make Mechanlink his placement project. The next stage was marketing his business and that's where crowdfunding came into play.

"The experience taught me a lot about marketing and some of the principles have been implemented into Mechanlink's strategy. This includes the power of content marketing, emotional appeals in messaging and also being relentless with marketing in pursuit of a goal. Most importantly, I have learnt to use my own resources for maximum output – which is a very important skill when working on a start-up. I believe every student should try crowdfunding. Why not? Nothing should be holding us back!"

Faruk Ojikutu,
BSc Accounting for Management.

In November 2018 Aston held a Day of GO!, marking the official launch of the University's crowdfunding platform with a day-long event. Having already tested the platform's effectiveness with a small number of student projects, it was time to share this exciting opportunity with the rest of the University. It was also a time to celebrate the success of those students who had helped to test the idea.

Day of GO!



The day was filled with activities both on campus and online. Aston Tennis Club kicked things off by launching its "New Balls Please!" project, followed by a sensational flashmob performance from Aston Dance Club (which had successfully crowdfunded for a new sound-system earlier in the year). The afternoon saw a specially orchestrated performance by Aston Music Society, which took over Aston Business School's Susan Cadbury Lecture Theatre with its big band. The performances were streamed live on Aston University's social media channels and received an amazing 53,856 views on Instagram alone. Inspired by all the activity, Aston Drama Society chose to join in with the fun, and launched its own project on GO!

Although the main focus of the day was to raise awareness of the philanthropic platform, it also gave alumni an opportunity to engage with students. Throughout the day visiting alumni enjoyed lunch with student project leaders, were given tours of the new Students' Union building and the Woodcock Sports

Centre, and took trips down memory lane with a visit to the archives of the old Students' Guild.

Promoting GO! throughout the day helped the students' projects enormously. Aston Tennis Club had already reached a quarter of its target by the end of the day, while Aston Christian Union, whose project had also gone live, saw a massive boost in pledges, leaving it within touching distance of its target weeks ahead of schedule.

Messages of support were shared on Aston University's social media channels from the Vice-Chancellor and the University's teaching staff. Other highlights and activities from the day included a cupcake giveaway in the reception of the Main Building and a Champagne reception, hosted by Aston Business School, complete with speeches, drinks and canapés. Since the day many students have crowdfunded and some amazing ideas have been supported and brought to life.



If you would like more information or would like to contribute a crowdfunding project, please visit the website go.aston.ac.uk.

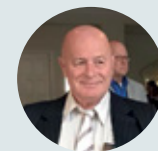
In November 2019 Aston will hold its second Day of GO! and is anticipating an even greater response – for updates follow us on Twitter @AstonAlumni or Facebook @AstonUniversityAlumni

ALUMNI NEWS

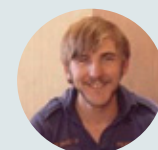
Where has life taken you since you've been away from Aston? We'd love to hear what you've been up to.

Why not drop us an email at alumniinfo@aston.ac.uk with your story and a photograph? The best will be included in the next edition of the magazine.

1970s



Andy Bush (BSc Mechanical Engineering, 1974) worked in the oil industry and then diverted into the UK rail system and US military for a while. He then returned to pursue his career in the oil industry. Andy's career enabled him to explore the world; he is now enjoying his retirement.



Peter C. Hille (BSc Civil Engineering, 1978) was employed by construction company J&P (Overseas) Ltd. in Dubai after graduation which involved an 18-month assignment building what is now Abu Dhabi Airport. In 1980 he travelled to Florida USA to follow what was always a dream to become a pilot and began training at the Florida Institute of Technology in Melbourne. After a year of training Peter worked for FIT Aviation as a flight instructor. He is now employed by Atlas Air Cargo as captain on the B-747, an aircraft he has been flying since 1992. Peter has loved working in the travel industry and the opportunities it has brought to see the world.

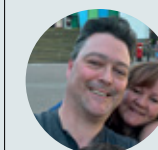
1980s



Carol Almond-Martin (BSc Pharmacology / Physiology and Chemistry, 1980) undertook a Complementary Studies programme during her time at Aston, in which she

chose to study German. The combination of a science degree and knowledge of a European language led to Carol securing a job at the European Patent Office in The Hague (on the western coast of the Netherlands), and later in Munich (Germany). After almost ten years at the patent office, she then moved to private practice in France and qualified as a patent attorney. Carol is now a senior partner of a law firm, her work focusses on intellectual property in the field of the life sciences, particularly plant and animal molecular biology and pharmaceuticals, and involves defending clients' interests at the European level in patent matters. Her Intellectual Property firm has many well-known clients in the biosciences sector including Bayer, Pasteur Institute and Vilmorin, as well as academic institutions such as the University of Columbia in New York.

1990s



Jason Deane (BSc Managerial and Administrative Studies, 1993) joined the corporate world at Cable & Wireless following graduation, and then Microsoft. On leaving, he set up a chain of internet cafes and games zones located in Guildford, Reading and Richmond town centres which later became the UK's longest running internet cafes. After selling this business, he became passionate about the global growth of cryptocurrency and how it will inevitably shape the future. He now owns mining operations both in the UK and Siberia, has a large and varied

portfolio of cryptocurrencies, and regularly speaks and blogs on the subject at originalcryptoguy.com.

His second book, *How to Explain Bitcoin to your Mum*, reached the Amazon Finance book chart and he is currently working on more publications. Jason lives with his partner and two children near Wokingham, Berkshire. He still drops into Aston from time to time and enjoys seeing the improvements the University is making.

Alexander Lloyd (BSc Managerial and Administrative Studies, 1994) has worked in the UK, Brazil, India and Italy for extended periods in a variety of roles related to the creation, negotiation and management of international contracts. These contracts have been across a variety of industries from specialist engineering, major systems integrators, defence, aerospace and IT Services. Alex now lives back home near Neath in the South Wales valleys with his wife and children. He is currently the Commercial Contracts Director – Enterprise with the leading global satellite provider, Inmarsat.



Gary Wood (BSc Human Psychology, 1994; PgC, 1999; PhD, 2000) is a chartered psychologist, solution-focused life coach and broadcaster. Gary is also a keen writer and has published several books; the first, *Sex, Lies and Stereotypes*, was inspired by a guest appearance on BBC Woman's Hour. Following the success of this book, Gary was given the opportunity to work on the Trisha Goddard show as Trisha's resident life coach and has published several books since. His latest title, *Letters to a New Student*, is a refreshing take on study skills, reflecting on all aspects of his work. It references formative experiences at Aston, and brings together psychological and coaching expertise with media experience. Today, Gary works in private practice as a coach and a research consultant.

2000s



Jacqueline Jeynes (PhD Health and Safety, 2002) found that her PhD in health and safety in small firms supported her role as the national policy chair of the Federation of Small Businesses and the Health and Safety Committee. As a placement visitor, Jacqueline's links to Aston University are very much alive. Jacqueline has published several books on Health and Safety in small firms and is currently working on her new title, *Forget Brexit – Just Manage your Risks!* (more details can be found on her website pencoedpublishing.co.uk). Her love of writing is also shown in her reports on trips around the world which regularly feature on website *Silver Travel Advisor*, for whom she has covered press visits to India, Italy and Hungary. As an art historian, Jacqueline also tutors on Aberystwyth University's art history distance-learning modules.

Naveed Ahmed (BSc Economics and Management, 2009) completed a one-year work placement during his time at Aston, working for one of the UK's top energy suppliers: E.ON. After graduating, he continued his career in the energy industry, working for RWE Npower for two years and then Centrica for five years. In 2016, Naveed moved abroad to Barcelona to study a master's degree in International Trade, Finance, and Development at the Barcelona Graduate School of Economics, graduating in 2017. At the beginning of 2018, he secured a place on the 222 Future Leaders Program at SHV Group and is now currently working in its business unit, Primagas Spain, as a commercial analyst.

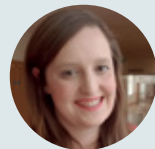


Nelson Sivalingam (BSc Business and Management, 2009) is the co-founder and CEO at HowNow, an AI-powered learning experience platform backed by the founder of MyVoucherCodes.com; the founders of Thomson Online Benefits; tennis player Andy Murray and a former McKinsey Partner. Nelson started his career at

L'Oreal and Apple, after which he founded the award-winning video tech business One Minute City and London's street-food group Kothu Kothu. Nelson has been an ambassador for national enterprise campaign StartUp Britain, and a contributor to the guest lecture series Entrepreneurship. He has been recognised by Virgin Media Business as one of the top 30 young innovative founders in the country. He is a thought-leader on start-ups and tech, contributing to publications such as the Guardian, the Telegraph and startups.co.uk, and was recently featured in a Bloomberg documentary on the entrepreneurial mindset.



Monica Bagga (BSc Computing for Business, 2010) graduated from Aston as the only female out of 180 candidates to have achieved a first-class honours degree. As a computer technology and data enthusiast, she completed an industrial placement at Oracle Corporation in Reading. She then secured a three-month internship in Computer Science at Aston University, exploring NHS datasets. Soon afterwards, she completed a two-year graduate scheme at Phoebus Software Ltd., working as an analyst programmer. Then, at Poundland's head office she was involved in projects where she shared data insights, provided faster reporting and demonstrated key performance indicators that allowed the organisation to grow from 400 to over 850 stores. Monica is now working as a senior business intelligence developer at Interserve PLC, providing intelligent analytical solutions to drive the business forward.



Elizabeth Grosvenor (BSc Business and Management, 2011) was awarded the Billington Cartmell prize at Aston University for advanced marketing communications, and after completing her degree she embarked on the Graduate Talent Acceleration Programme at BP. During this programme she was the internal communications lead for business change and IT projects across the business,

launching and embedding Yammer, a social media platform, into her business area. Following the programme she moved into the public sector working at Northampton College and in the NHS. Now she is the internal communications manager at Kettering General Hospital, leading on communications for their 4,000 staff members.



Ahmed Khan (MSc Business Management, 2012) lives in Dubai, helping small and medium-sized enterprises to perform better, and helping people to kick-start their dream businesses through his consulting firm. Ahmed deals with all aspects of business including consulting, market research, operations management, digital transformation, deals and contracts. As well as developing corporate relationships in the United Arab Emirates, Ahmed is part of business networking groups and business councils where business is generated through referrals.



Kelvin Oba (MSc Chemical Engineering, 2013) secured a graduate role at Honeywell UOP as a process control and instrumentation engineer. He has since worked worldwide with refineries utilising UOP technologies, contributing to their success stories and getting good feedback from customers and colleagues. Kelvin is also a published author; after the success of his first book, *Emotions and Belief*, published during his time at Aston University, he has published his second book, *Poems About You*. Kelvin continues to work as a dedicated engineer as well as building his own brand, *Created by Kelz*, that covers his many creative sides as an author, travel blogger, and content creator, to name but a few.

Dimitriya Valkova (BSc Politics with International Relations, 2014) went on to work in learning and development, for Amazon, Goldman Sachs and now for the French bank Société Generale. Her passion for Human Resources started while she was completing her industrial placement in her third year at Aston. The placement

taught her about all the different aspects of HR and gave her the opportunity to work on a number of projects. She is currently an adviser at Société Generale working on a new government initiative: the apprenticeship levy. Dimitriya advises businesses on how best to utilise their levy funds and to align that to their business strategy. Her degree has given her a good understanding of politics (both national and international), economics and history, which she finds useful in her role.



Monique Malcolm-Hay (BSc Business and Management, 2015) is an ICAEW chartered accountant working as a business restructuring services senior consultant at PwC. As part of her mission to educate, empower and inspire, Monique spearheaded the creation of New Gen Accountants (NGA), a non-profit organisation which provides advice and support to more than 200 individuals in the UK who are pursuing accountancy as a career. After being awarded a first-class honours and founding Aston's Teach First Society, Monique remains an active member of the alumni community, mentoring students via the Aston Professional Mentoring Scheme. Having undertaken a placement at the University of Florida, been seconded to the PwC Dubai office, and volunteered in both Brazil and Kenya, Monique now considers herself to be a global citizen who is endlessly giving back and empowering those around her.

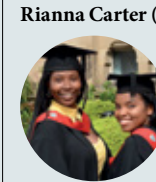


Alikhan Uzakov (BSc Computing Science and Mathematics, 2018) was union chairperson of the Aston Students' Union; an Aston University course representative; worked as a professor's assistant; helped to teach the programming language Java to first-year students; participated and won several hackathons (in Birmingham and around the UK) and received an award as a Student Employee of the Year 2018. Passionate about innovative technology and cyber security, he runs an IT blog medium.com/@uzakov and has a website uzakov.io. He has versatile work

and internship experience and is currently employed as an associate software engineer at Clearswift, an information security company in Reading offering innovative data-loss prevention solutions.



Yuvin Wijesinghe (BSc Business and Management, 2018) moved to Hanoi, Vietnam, as a management trainee after graduating. He was offered a job at Expo Freight, a global logistics provider, ranked in the top 25 freight forwarders. During his time at Expo Freight, Yuvin has focussed on developing client relations and bringing in new accounts to the business. He now oversees the business development for both North Vietnam and the Philippines. Yuvin handles many global clients on a daily basis, mainly in the garment industry, which has provided him with a good opportunity to practice what he has learnt throughout his time at Aston University.



Rianna Carter (BSc Sociology and Social Policy, 2018) and **Kanisha Warrican** (BSc Sociology, 2018) have been participating in the *Doing Politics, Changing Society* programme. This programme trains black and minority ethnic women to be active citizens and take leadership roles in the political and civic sphere. As part of this programme they have created their own micro social campaign, *Let's Talk Melanin*. This challenges society's beauty standards by celebrating body diversity amongst young black women. In order to raise awareness, they mentor secondary school girls, write blogs and post on their social media pages (including their Twitter account @letstalkmelanin). They also invite black women to write to them and share their story. To conclude their political programme in March 2019, Kanisha and Rianna showcased their campaign at the Town Hall in Birmingham. The co-founders are continuing to grow *Let's Talk Melanin* into a movement which changes the way that people view beauty standards and black women's bodies.



Rianna Carter and Kanisha Warrican have been participating in the *Doing Politics, Changing Society* programme which trains black and minority ethnic women to be active citizens and take leadership roles in the political and civic sphere."



Read more entries on the website: bit.ly/2XD3Bed



NEFES

The brainchild of Hannah Janisch, a student of Industrial Product Design, Nefes is a portable communicable disease biomarker analyser. Put simply, this compact unit can detect distinctive biomarkers in the breath, helping people to diagnose diseases and speed up treatment, even in the most challenging of situations.

Because it is non-invasive and highly portable, Nefes could assist medical professionals in developing countries – for example, in the wake of natural disasters – to reduce the chances of infections spreading and becoming problematic outbreaks.

The data collected by the device can be further analysed once connected to a computer.



Hannah Janisch
Industrial Product Design



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If you would like to volunteer to host an event in your country next year, or would like to connect with other Aston alumni in your area, please get in touch with us at:

alumniinfo@aston.ac.uk

Connect with your local Aston graduates by joining an Aston Alumni Chapter.

For more information please visit:
aston.ac.uk/alumni/chapters



Here to support you throughout your professional life

Wherever you are in your career journey we're here to help

- ▶ **Masters courses** (online and on campus)
- ▶ **The Aston MBA** (full time on campus, part time and online)

20% SCHOLARSHIP FOR ASTON GRADUATES

*Scholarship applies to all Aston University standard taught masters and FT MBA programmes for all Aston continuing students/graduates. Some online programmes are excluded.

- ▶ **PhD and DBA**
- ▶ **Executive Development**
- ▶ **Support for small businesses** (through the Aston Centre for Growth)

▶ To find out more visit www.aston.ac.uk/alumni
Or email alumniinfo@aston.ac.uk