

Institution: Aston University

Unit of Assessment: 27 Area Studies

a. Overview

Area Studies at Aston University is principally located within the [School of Languages and Social Sciences](#) (LSS). Our submission to this UoA is organised and presented under the umbrella of the [Aston Centre for Europe \(ACE\)](#), a new, University-funded research centre set up in 2009 upon the initiative of Professors **John Gaffney** and **Simon Green**. ACE was supported via a grant of £500,000 over five years from the University's Strategic Investment Fund (SIF), with three key aims: to become a major centre for research in European politics and society; to ensure the real-world applicability of that research through practitioner engagement; and to develop self-sustaining research activities by the end of that period. In its first five years it has achieved all three of these and is now poised for the next phase of its development.

Despite being a young centre, ACE builds on a distinguished tradition of European Area Studies at Aston University. For RAE 2008, the School submitted all its research active members of staff to a single UoA (European Studies). However, a period of rapid growth since then, including the consolidation of new disciplinary subject areas, means that for REF 2014, the School is making two separate submissions, to Modern Languages and Linguistics (UoA 28) and to Area Studies. Within LSS, ACE forms the research arm of the School's Politics and International Relations (PIR) subject group (where **Beattie, Copsey, Gaffney, Green, Leustean, Obradovic-Wochnik, Rowe** and **Turner** are based), but also integrates three colleagues from the School's Sociology and Policy group (**Dodds, Fuller** and **West**) and one from Aston Business School (**Bailey**); together, they form ACE's Policy Studies Unit (PSU). Our members conduct research on the UK, France, Germany, Poland, Romania, the Balkans and the EU, to name but a few.

b. Research strategy

Following RAE 2008, the School undertook a comprehensive review of its research strategy. This resulted in the establishment of three new research centres, of which ACE is one. The rationale behind ACE was both to sharpen the University's existing academic profile in this area and to make a bold statement of intent about the strategic importance of Europe for the UK, and thereby respond to the recent decline in profile for Europe within some UK universities. The study of both European Politics and Political Science and of European Languages therefore lies at the heart of the University's research strengths as articulated in its [Forward 2020](#) strategy. This is complemented at School level by the strategy [Towards 2020: Research in LSS at Aston University](#). Both underline the University and School's commitment to supporting and extending our existing strengths in Area Studies. ACE's research strategy therefore has the following eight key aims:

1. To consolidate and grow an interdisciplinary research environment

As a new centre, the primary challenge for ACE was first to establish and then to consolidate its presence in a financially sustainable way. To this end, and from the outset, ACE was conceived of as a 'real' as opposed to a 'virtual' centre and therefore had its foundations within the PIR subject group, where its Directors (**Copsey, Gaffney and Green**) are also based. This was vital in providing the staff numbers necessary to generate the momentum for ACE to achieve its goals. This was aided initially by a rejuvenation of the group through three replacement appointments, two of which were for retirements, in 2008-9 (**Beattie** and **Turner** as Lecturers, plus **Green** as Professor). But it was the University's strategic investment which was to prove decisive: by allowing the School to create three new full-time permanent academic appointments (**Copsey** [Senior Lecturer], **Obradovic-Wochnik** and **Rowe** [both Lecturers]), the PIR staffing complement grew in 2009-10 by 50 per cent. What is more, PIR's strong student recruitment has created the ability not only for these three new posts to be self-sustaining, but also for further expansion of staff numbers through a new Lecturer appointment in 2013. Over time, the establishment of the Policy Studies Unit (consisting of **Dodds, West, Fuller** and most recently **Bailey**) has also helped to consolidate our research environment by bringing in researchers not only from LSS' Sociology and Policy group, but also from Aston Business School. Moreover, the School's continuing success in student recruitment means that numbers of academic staff in PIR and Sociology and Policy are almost certain to increase in coming years, thereby further strengthening the research base and creating the opportunity for more interdisciplinary research.

ACE's focus on European Politics and Society complements the three other research centres in the School: the Centre for Forensic Linguistics, the Centre for Language Education Research at Aston and the Aston Centre for Interdisciplinary Research into Language and Diversity. Together, the centres create an interdisciplinary mosaic, reflecting the unusually broad range of subject areas contained within the School.

2. To maintain and increase the quality and quantity of high-level research in order to enhance performance in REF 2014 and beyond, and

3. To support the development of researchers

Within ACE, **Gaffney** acts both as Co-Director of ACE and as Research Enhancer (RE) for PIR. In this position, his role is to support staff in developing the quality and range of their research output (see *Section c.i*), a process in which he is strongly supported by **Copsey** and **Green**. Further support mechanisms include research start-up funding, a weekly research day, research leave, writing retreats and the Distinguished Visitor Scheme (see *Section c.i*). For the period 2014-19, we aim to enhance research mentoring further as well as further develop our strategic publication and funding strategies with individuals and groups of researchers.

4. To increase external research income

For such a young centre, ACE has been extraordinarily successful in securing external research income from Research Councils and other funding bodies. In the space of just five years, ACE has been awarded some £830,000 in grants, bringing its total awards, with the University's investment, to over £1.3 million. For the period 2014-19, we are committed to expanding income generation further. To do so, our strategy involves: (i) maintaining the principle that all teaching staff in ACE and PIR should also be research-active, and making this an explicit element of our appointment strategy; (ii) augmenting this potential through establishment of a peer review group of the growing number of UoA members who have succeeded in attracting major funding in order to review and advise on grant applications, as well as mentor ECRs; (iii) prioritisation of funding bids which draw on cross-disciplinary approaches and expertise through our interdisciplinary Research Centres; (iv) the expectation that UoA members who are granted research leave will develop an external funding application. This strategy is further supported by the School's and University's Research Support Team, which identifies funding opportunities which match our profile, and expansion of the dedicated scanning and information services provided to the UoA by growth in the University's Research Support Office.

5. To develop a stronger interdisciplinary and international research network based on partnerships with European and international institutions and funding bodies

ACE has made an impressive and immediate impact in this respect, establishing links with a wide range of international partners and funders in a short space of time. These include the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), the International Association for the Study of German Politics (IASGP) and UACES (whose Student Forum we will be hosting in 2014) and especially the European Commission, which awarded a Jean Monnet Chair to **Copsey** in 2013. *Section e* provides further details of our international collaboration with Universities.

6. To increase the number of research students

Despite being a newly-founded centre, ACE (including PSU) has supervised 9.5 doctoral students to completion during the current REF period. This constitutes a solid base from which to progress in the future, and the School and University has put a comprehensive range of structures in place to cement the research student experience (see *Section c.ii* below). The School has considerably expanded its provision of research studentships, and ACE will be at the forefront of the University's drive to be part of a successful ESRC Doctoral Training Centre after 2016.

7. To encourage research with impact for the local, national and international communities

Given ACE's strategic situation at the interface between academia and the policy world, this aspect has been a particular strength for us. From the outset, engagement with users is integrated into our specific research projects; we also use our accumulated expertise and experience to contribute to policy debates more broadly. This aspect is obviously discussed in more detail in REF3, but some examples include:

- **Bailey** was a Specialist Advisor to the House of Commons Select Committee on the West Midlands (2009), and has given evidence to a number of Select Committees and All Party Parliamentary Groups (2008-13)
- **Copsey** has briefed the Shadow Europe Minister, Emma Reynolds MP (2011-13) and HM Treasury (January 2011); he provided expert analysis to the EU's Committee of the Regions (2010–14, together with **Rowe**) and the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida, 2008–)
- **Gaffney** has lectured to senior British and French military officers on French politics (2013)
- **Green** has briefed the German Federal President's Office on migration to the UK (2013) and (with **Turner**) the German Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation on British political parties (2012)
- **Turner** has provided regular briefings to Government agencies and shadow ministers on housing and planning issues (2009-13).

In addition, to aid and support this process, ACE has appointed a number of distinguished Practitioner Fellows, including: Sir Michael Arthur KCMG (former Ambassador to Germany and High Commissioner to India); David Harley CBE (former Deputy Secretary General of the European Parliament); Daniel Franklin (Managing Editor of *The Economist*, and Aston alumnus); and Peter Kellner (President of YouGov). Thus, in February 2012, one of our Fellows, Andrew Douglas from the US clearing house DTCC, facilitated an invitation to **Copsey** to brief a US Congressional Committee on the Eurozone crisis. In March 2013, Sir Michael Arthur helped chair an FCO-funded high-level British-German policy seminar on migration, which derived from a research project led by **Green**. Such activities will of course remain at the heart of ACE's profile for the 2014-19 period.

8. To demonstrate our research excellence to the outside world

Alongside our commitment to engage with users, the promotion of our research, as well as of our accumulated expertise on the countries we research, in the media is a central concern of ACE. Just as in the case of user engagement, the level and reach of our activity here has been impressive. ACE members both [blog](#) regularly and provide commentary in the mainstream media. For instance, **Gaffney** made over 30 media appearances in connection with the 2012 French Presidential elections, as well as writing for the *New Statesman* and for the LSE's Europe blog. **Obradovic-Wochnik** has provided expert comment on the on-going International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. **Green** has published analyses on German and British politics for the US think tank AICGS, whose *Advisor* is read by 8,000 elite-level subscribers in the US alone. **Turner** is sought out frequently for comments on housing and planning policy. **Bailey** has made over 1,500 local, national and international media appearances since 2005 and is one of the leading academic commentators on the European auto industry and industrial policy.

c. People, including:

i. Staffing strategy and staff development

The continued growth of ACE's staffing base is a top priority for 2014-19 in order to generate the increased volume of high-quality research activity outlined in *Section b*. In order for such growth to be sustainable financially, it has to be underpinned by an increase in both research income and student recruitment. Here, both PIR and the Sociology and Policy Group (which hosts most of the Policy Studies Unit) can build on a strong recent trajectory. With the School aiming to grow its student numbers by one-third by 2020, a realistic ambition for ACE is to double the number of Category A staff by the end of the decade.

ACE and the School more broadly support the development of staff from early career researcher to senior academic. The School implements Aston's commitment to the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers, notably through its Performance Development and Reward Scheme. Aston received the HR Excellence in Research Award in September 2010, renewed in 2013, and is one of only ten universities in the UK to have retained the award. As staff progress through their career, they benefit from a range of structures and incentives to support research:

- **Research start-up funding:** Through School-level funding, all new staff entering their first academic post at Aston receive a start-up fund of £5000 to be spent on equipment, conference travel, or research projects. This funding is particularly targeted towards supporting early career researchers within their first two years of employment.

- **Early career researchers (ECRs):** All ECRs are given lighter teaching and administrative loads, and establish a career development plan in conjunction with a mentor who supports this process. ECRs present their work through the research seminar series and participating in the discussion and development of funded research projects. At University level, ECRs from all Schools elect representatives to attend the 'ECR Forum' overseen by the Pro-Vice Chancellor for research.
- **Performance development:** All colleagues have an annual performance development review (PDR) with a reviewer who helps them set appropriate performance targets. Research development is a key component in reviewing research active staff, with targets for planning, progressing and delivering on publishing, applying for external grants and managing funded projects. The PDR forms a central part of the framework for career progression at all levels and is a means to recognise and reward exceptional achievement in research.
- **Postdoctoral Research Fellows:** As a result of grant success, ACE appointed its first three Postdoctoral Research Fellows in 2012-13. The fellows actively publish with their PIs and gain experience of co-organising research seminars and workshops. They too belong to the ECR forum and also agree a career development plan in line with the [Vitae Researcher Development Framework](#). The mentoring, experience and support ACE provides will considerably improve their employment prospects.
- **Research Enhancer (RE):** All subject groups in the School appoint a senior member of academic staff to act as a RE, advising colleagues on publishing, grant applications and conference organisation. In the case of PIR, this role has been taken by **Gaffney** throughout the census period, which has created stability and continuity in the guidance provided. In this capacity, he has also convened regular research afternoons with internal and external speakers.
- **Research Support Office:** ACE benefits from the services of a dedicated Research Development Manager (see *Section d*) to provide one-to-one support to colleagues, advising on research funding opportunities and grant applications.
- **Research day:** The School enables each research active member of staff to have one day per week free of teaching and administrative duties in order to concentrate on research.
- **Research leave:** The School encourages its members to take research leave under the School's policy entitling all research active staff to apply for one semester (i.e. six months) of research leave in every seven, with special priority for ECRs. The outputs from such leave are planned carefully to feed into the UoA's submission plans and include a requirement to develop a funding application. Between 2008-13, nine of the UoA's twelve Category A staff qualified for and were granted a period of research leave.
- **Research allowance:** In addition to the start-up funding offered to new academic appointees, all research-active members of staff have access to an annual research allowance from the School and can also apply for further support from ACE.
- **Technological support for research:** All members of the UoA and School benefit from the support of two in-house technology facilitators (see *Section d*).
- **Communication support for research:** ACE works with the University's Marketing team as well as its Communications Agency to help staff disseminate their research.
- **Distinguished Visitor Scheme:** The University supports a Distinguished Visitor Scheme, under which academics from outside the UK visit Aston for up to a week to present their research and work with staff and research students. Under this scheme, ACE was delighted to welcome Prof. Udo Zolleis (2011) and Dr Dominic Heinz (2013), who were invited in connection with research projects by **Green / Turner** and **Turner / Rowe** respectively.
- **Equality and Diversity:** The University has a well-established equality and diversity policy and code of practice. Adherence to these principles is embedded within our overall strategy, and our policies and procedures relating to research students and the employment of staff. There is an Equality Action Plan which is reported on and published in our [Annual Equality Report](#). Of the Category A staff submitted to this UoA, five are women and seven are men. The University operates an annual promotions round, with research excellence constituting one of two grounds for promotion. During the census period, **Rowe, Leustean, Dodds, West** and **Fuller** were promoted to Senior Lecturer, and **Copsey** to Reader.

ii Research students

In October 2013, the number of research students in the School had grown to 62 / 40.5 FTE (35 female, 27 male), double the number at the time of RAE 2008 (19.5 FTEs). In terms of completions, ACE alone has returned 9.5 completions, compared to 8 for the entire School in RAE 2008. In preparation for doctoral studies, students can opt to study from a range of new MA programmes in PIR, including innovative Double and Joint MA programmes with French and German universities. Since 2008, the School has offered a total of 19 PhD bursaries, and these have helped ACE to attract strong doctoral students. Research students are involved and supported at every stage of their programmes in the following ways:

- **Graduate School (GS):** The UoA's research students are supported by the University-wide Graduate School, which aims to enrich and support their academic, professional and social development and is responsible for all procedures related to assessment and quality assurance. The GS ensures that doctoral students benefit from cross-School and cross-institutional working. Through the 'Aston Postgraduate Research Society' they meet other students from across the University, thus benefiting from student networks and societies that promote formal and informal events. The GS also affords students access to a range of experts in different areas (e.g. staff development; careers staff; research grant support).
- **PhD supervision:** All ACE research students have both a supervisor, who is a specialist in their chosen field and an associate supervisor, who offers complementary areas of specialism. Supervisors receive specialist training for their role from Aston's Centre for Staff and Graduate Development. Students meet their supervisor on average once a fortnight throughout their programme. In collaboration with their supervisors, students keep detailed records of their meetings and of the development of their research planning. In addition, students enter their monthly research activities on a University-wide, on-line record system. They also receive guidance and support in their studies from the School's Director of Research Degree Programmes who meets and works with the students individually.
- **School Research culture:** ACE encourages all its graduate students to play a central role in the research culture of the Unit and the School. They are invited to all public lectures, the research seminar series, as well as to workshops and conferences hosted by ACE and the School's other research centres. Students also contribute to these events. The School runs an annual School Postgraduate Conference, in which it requires all 2nd year doctoral students to present their work in progress. Doctoral students present a paper at a conference or publish some of their work as part of their academic training. Each research student is supported by an annual sum from the School of up to £550 for conference travel. Research students are provided with dedicated office space including printing facilities.
- **Research methods training:** In their first year, all LSS research students engage in a common Research Methods and Skills Course (RMSC). This includes academic writing skills, quantitative and qualitative research methods, the use of research software, literature reviews, writing and presenting conference papers and research ethics and is taught for two hours per week over 20 weeks. Students can focus on particular sessions in the programme in order to develop the individual set of research skills needed for their specific project, while maintaining a consistent foundation in critical research philosophy and methodology. This course is assessed on a pass/fail basis at the end of the first year of each student's graduate studies.
- **Personal and professional development:** Research students can opt to attend a host of courses offered by the University's Centre for Staff and Graduate Development, including support with statistics, career development and training, as well as development in Learning & Teaching. Research students are encouraged to develop their skills as future lecturers by achieving the 'Aston Certificate: An Introduction to Learning and Teaching in HE', and by making a contribution to teaching on university programmes.

d. Income, infrastructure and facilities

Income

In addition to the substantial internal investment from the University, attracting external research income is and will remain a major priority for ACE. Since RAE 2008, when the School made a single submission to European Studies, its research income has increased by over 3800%, from £80k to £3.1m in the current census period. Around one-quarter of this has been won by researchers from the Area Studies UoA. Major grant successes include:

Environment template (REF5)

- An ESRC grant award (£22,464) on Poland's influence in the EU (**Copsey**, 2009-10).
- A £70,622 ESRC Grant to investigate religious lobbies in the EU (**Leustean**, 2010-11).
- £52,000 from the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) to research the changing nature of Christian Democracy in Germany (**Green and Turner**, 2010-11).
- A £77,000 Leverhulme grant for a study on political leadership in the UK (**Gaffney**, 2012-14).
- A tender, worth £345,000, to produce research reports and policy advice for the EU's Committee of the Regions (**Copsey and Rowe**, 2010-14).
- £58,500 from the DAAD for a comparative study of migration policy in the UK and Germany, plus £34,000 from the FCO for a high-level policy seminar (**Green**, 2012-13).
- The DAAD awarded ACE a further £48,000 for a project entitled *Reframing German Federalism* (**Rowe and Turner**, 2012-13).

Infrastructure

- **Management:** The School's Associate Dean Research (ADR) bears overall responsibility for research in the School. The ADR reports to the Executive Dean, chairs the School's Research Committee and works closely with the Research Enhancers of the four Academic Subject Groups. Members of Research Committee are the Director of Research Degree Programmes, who also represents the School at Graduate School level, the Directors of the four Research Centres, the Heads of Academic Subject Groups, and the Research Enhancers.
- **Research Centres:** Since 2008, the University has invested a total of £898k into the creation of the School's four Research Centres; with £500k, ACE has received the lion's share of this funding. ACE provides the framework for the UoA's research activities and is key to its collaborative, interdisciplinary research environment (see *Sections a and b* for details). In ACE's case, the University's strategic funding has led to the recruitment of new academic staff, a 0.4 FTE administrator, creation of a physical identity and dedicated postgraduate facilities.
- **Research support:** The research management team and Research Centres are supported by a Research Officer within the School and a Research Development Manager in the University's Research Support Office. In addition, two technology facilitators, whose posts were established to provide targeted guidance and advice on all aspects of technology in research, teaching and learning, provide one-to-one support (at least 200 sessions per year) and workshops (approximately 15 per year) to address specific needs and enable researchers and research students to use up-to-date and project-appropriate software. The School has a dedicated Finance Officer to provide support, including monthly updates, on budgets of existing projects.

Resources and facilities

LSS has a site license for several key software packages, including NVIVO, SPSS, EndNote, EXMARaLDA, Audacity and VideoPad. We have equipment for loan in the form of professional quality digital recorders. There are also two newly refurbished open-plan offices for research students and a room dedicated to academic visitors, all equipped with networked computers, free mono and colour printing and telephone. The total University investment in the refurbishment was approximately £15k. The University has recently completed an £8.38m refurbishment of the library, and is well-stocked in Area Studies, as well as subscribing to all major journal packages.

e. Collaboration or contribution to the discipline or research base

Collaboration and contribution to the discipline are integral elements of ACE's strategic goal of becoming a major centre for research into European politics and society (*Section a*). In a short space of time, we have built up a range of high-quality partnerships with Universities in Europe and elsewhere, and our staff are embedded in major networks of the discipline. Here too, such engagements will continue to be at the heart of ACE's activities for the 2014-19 period.

Collaboration

In addition to international funders (see *Section b* above), ACE has built programme and research links with a range of Universities, including the Institut d'Etudes Politiques (IEP) Lille, IEP Rennes, the University of Bamberg, the University of Bratislava, MGIMO-University Moscow and the Centre for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies at the University of Toronto. In addition, **Copsey** is co-founder of the *Wider Europe Network* (www.wider-europe.org), which brings together scholars and practitioners on the EU's neighbourhood policy. For 2014-19, we will deepen existing relations with prestigious partners and develop new relationships in India, Turkey and Canada.

Conference Organisation

ACE has brought together practitioners, user groups and researchers in over 30 conferences, lectures and research workshops, which have regularly attracted audiences in excess of 100. The following examples illustrate the range of activities:

- ACE's *New EU Agenda Series* acted as an interface between academics and practitioners and was funded by grants from the European Commission totalling £102k (2009-13)
- *Green Growth: creating jobs and sustainable prosperity*, ACE Conference, July 2010.
- *Public Administration in a Time of Austerity*, conference organised by **Dodds**, May 2011.
- With the University of Birmingham, ACE co-hosted the *Journal of Common Market Studies Annual Review Lecture*, October 2009, given by Professor Vivien Schmidt (Boston University).
- ACE was an official co-sponsor of the German-British Forum Annual Conference (2009-10)
- *Looking Back, Looking Forward*, conference on French Presidential Elections, April 2012.
- **Rowe** co-organised the EU-funded 'Bringing the Policy Back In' Conference, Birmingham, 2009 (keynote speaker: Vice President of the European Commission) and the Aston New EU Agenda series of conferences (co-funded by European Commission representation in London).

Contributions to representing the discipline

- **Bailey** was twice Chair of the Regional Studies Association (RSA) (2006-2012); was elected to the Academy of Social Sciences in 2008; was an FP7 Expert Evaluator and Moderator for the European Commission (2007-2008), and an External Evaluator for the European Court of Auditors (2009-10).
- **Copsey** and **Gaffney** are members of the ESRC Peer Review College.
- **Gaffney** was Vice-President of the Association of University Professors of French Studies (2007-2010); UK Political Studies Association, Panel Judge, Best Book (2009).
- **Green** was Chair of the International Association for the Study of German Politics (2009-11); was elected to the Academy of Social Sciences in 2011; was one of only two academic delegates at each annual high-level British-German Königswinter conference during this census period; was the only UK academic invited to participate in the DAAD's official international delegation to observe the German election in 2013; is a member of the Advisory Group for the ESRC's *The UK in a Changing Europe* initiative (2013-).

Visiting Fellowships / Professorships, Scholarships and Prizes

- **Bailey** has held several Visiting Professorships, including at the Singapore Institute of Management (2013) and the Ecole Supérieure de Commerce Clermont (2009-2010).
- **Copsey** has had Visiting Fellowships with the Polish Academy of Sciences (2008), the Polish Institute of Political Affairs (2008); SSEES-University College London (2007-10); Sussex European Institute (2007-date); University of Helsinki (2010); he is a Visiting Professor at IEP Rennes (2012-date), the College of Europe (2012-13), and MGIMO in Moscow (2009-date).
- **Gaffney** is a Visiting Professor at IEP Rennes and at IEP Lille.
- **Leustean** was awarded *The George Blazyca Prize in East European Studies* by the British Association for Slavonic and East European Studies (2010), and received the University Award for Outstanding Early Career Researcher (2012).
- **Obradovic-Wochnik** (ECR) was a Visiting Research Fellow at the European Union Institute for Security Studies, Paris (2008), and at Helsinki University (2012); in 2012, she was a Visiting Scholar at Harvard University.

Editorial Contributions

- **Bailey** is an editor of the journals *Regional Studies* (2013-) and *Policy Studies* (2006-)
- **Copsey** is the Co-Editor of the *Journal of Common Market Studies Annual Review* (since 2008)
- **Gaffney** is an Executive Editorial Board Member of the *Journal of French Politics*.
- **Leustean** was the Reviews Editor for *Politics, Religion and Ideology* (2011-12).
- **Turner** is the Reviews Editor for *German Politics* (2013-).