



**PROF. GINA RIPPON, PRO-VICE CHANCELLOR, ASTON UNIVERSITY  
ASTON UNIVERSITY: SKILLS, EMPLOYABILITY AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP.**

From its origins, founded in 1895 to provide the skilled workforce required to ensure Birmingham's place in the Industrial Revolution, Aston University has focussed not only on ensuring its graduates have the appropriate knowledge and training for their chosen career, but also have more generic practical skills and understanding of the world of employment. We aim to ensure that our students are 'workplace' ready.

We start early. Before students enrol at Aston, our Pre-Entry Advisor offers coordinated support and promotes cohesive messages around employability to our prospective students, their parents and teachers. We have a Careers and Placements presence at Open Days and embed employability into the student experience through a combination of curriculum based and optional workshops for our students' right from their first year. Believing that knowledge of a foreign language provides students with many highly valued transferable skills, Aston also offers a successful University Wide Language Programme (UWLP) open to all first year students as part of their studies.

Over 70% Of Aston's undergraduates take a 4 year 'sandwich' course, with an integrated placement year in their 3rd year. With the support of scholarships and fee-waiver schemes, this is virtually 'fee free', assuaging the concerns of students ( and their families) about student debt . Preparation for the placement is embedded in students' 2nd year curriculum, and includes CV writing, employability skills, workplace behaviour and interview practice. Students

are supported throughout the year by an academic supervisor from their degree course, as well as a work-place based supervisor. Assessment of the year can include 'reflective logs' where the students chart their progress in acquiring work-based skills and identify changes in their ability to deal with the world of work. These logs can prove invaluable when the students graduate and are preparing their personal profiles for their CVs. Importantly, when they return, they feed back to the next round of potential placement students what they learned while away, what skills they learned were necessary for their particular role and what their 'successors' could bring to the placement experience. We have a target that by 2020, 100% of our students will have some kind of placement experience, ideally for a full year but where this is not possible at least some focussed summer opportunity. Of these, we aim that 30% of these placements will be overseas, either in industry or studying abroad. Currently, over 1000 of our UG students take a 12month industrial placement with over 40% of them being offered a job in their placement company. In addition, our research has shown that those students who have been on placement do better in their final degree performance, having learned the skills of time management, task prioritisation, objective setting etc. So the students get the double benefit of work-based training and a better degree.

As well as offering the placement year benefits, we ensure that the 'soft skills' associated with employability such as problem-solving, teamworking, social awareness and project management are part of our students' learning experiences. A good example of this is the Conceive, Design, Implement, Operate (CDIO) approach in our Engineering courses. CDIO derives from an initiative that holds project based learning at the heart of its credentials. The framework provides students with an education, stressing engineering fundamentals set in the context of Conceiving, Designing, Implementing and Operating real-world systems and products. Students learn by engaging in practical, cross-disciplinary project-based work. The aim is to move away from intense and assessment-heavy teaching and move to a culture where students have space, encouragement and discover "learning to learn" for themselves. Universities we work with on this initiative include Liverpool and Queens (Belfast) in the UK, MIT and Purdue in the United States, Chalmers and the Danish Technical University in Scandinavia and Tsinghua in China. Aston teams took 1st and 2nd place in a recent international CDIO event in Barcelona. Employers themselves are embedded in activities at Aston and we can work with them to ensure that we can upskill their work force through non-traditional access to academic opportunities. We have recently worked with CapGemini plc, one of the world's foremost providers of consulting, technology and outsourcing services, to develop a new work-based degree, which allows Capgemini Higher Apprentices to progress to the second year of University to complete a BSc (Hons) degree. Two related degrees – Software Engineering and Business Information Systems - have been developed, and are the first sponsored degrees in the UK ICT sector to be taught and delivered almost entirely in the workplace rather than requiring students to attend day release at University. The degrees require two years on the Higher Apprenticeship and three years studying for the BSc.

Additional employer involvement sees the creation of a form of 'virtuous circle' where employers, having benefitted from Aston's expertise, can then serve as mentors for the next generation of business hopefuls (as well, in some cases offer them placement opportunities). Aston is part of the Goldman Sachs 10,000 Small Businesses scheme, an innovative fully funded programme designed to unlock the economic and job creation potential of small businesses and social enterprises from across the Midlands region. The Programme is delivered by Aston Business School in partnership with the Goldman Sachs Foundation and supports SMEs who wish to expand. Graduates from this scheme can then feedback into relevant parts of the curriculum or support another of our initiatives, BSEEN (Birmingham Skills for Enterprise and Employability Network) a student and graduate start-up programme. This is a collaborative initiative between Aston University, Birmingham City University and the University of Birmingham, offering students and graduates a package of intensive start-up support for new ventures. Successful participants benefit from a variety of workshops, networking opportunities, tailored mentoring, grant and work space at Birmingham Science Park Aston, Birmingham City University or the University of Birmingham. So our employability support for our students extends beyond their graduation.

Aston University has been consistently in the UK's top 10 for Graduate Employability for the last 20 years (HESA and Sunday Times rankings) and have been in the top 25 UK universities most likely to be targeted by the UK's top graduate recruiters (2013 High Flyers survey). Our strap line is "Employable graduates, Exploitable research" and ensuring we live up to this is constantly informing what we do for our students.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Prof. Dr Georgina Rippon graduated from Bedford College (University of London) with a bachelor degree in Psychology and subsequently gained a PhD in Psychophysiology from Birkbeck College (University of London). In 1975, she was appointed to the newly established Department of Psychology at Warwick University, where she remained until 2000.

She appointed as a Senior Lecturer in Psychology, and Deputy Director of the Neurosciences Research Institute in Aston University. She was appointed Head of Psychology in 2003; Associate Dean of Postgraduate Programmes in the School of Life and Health Sciences (LHS) and Deputy Head of School in 2005. In 2008, she became Associate Dean, International Relations (LHS), in which role she visited Korea, Vietnam, Singapore, Malaysia and Japan, as well as Australia and the United States. She took up her post as Pro-Vice Chancellor (International) for Aston in 2012.

Prof Georgina is Professor of Cognitive NeuroImaging in LHS, and Principal Scientist in the Aston Brain Centre and is involved in the development of a paediatric magnetoencephalography (MEG) system for the study of developmental disorders. She has served as President of the British Psychophysiology Society (now the British Association of Cognitive Neuroscience).