



Evaluating participation in the AdvanceHE
Aurora Leadership Development
Programme 2018/19 as an approach to
encouraging women to apply for senior
roles within the university.

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1. Executive summary

In June 2018, Partnership Council approved the funding of up to ten places on the 2018/19 AdvanceHE Aurora Leadership Development Programme at a maximum cost of £15,000. The aim of the investment was to encourage women to apply for senior roles within the partnership and to build educational leadership capacity within the university. This evaluation report explores the developmental value of the 2018/19 Aurora Programme through an analysis of the perceptions of the ten participants selected for the programme. The online survey and a focus group gathered feedback and the findings are structured around three broad themes: 1) the main developmental values of the programme to date; 2) the opportunities which have already occurred as a result of the programme; and 3) the institutional support required to embed and build on the programme.

The evaluation findings indicated that all the programme participants had reported the enormous developmental value of the Aurora programme. Most highly valued were the content of the development days; the opportunity to build both internal and external networks and the provision of a mentor through the University Mentoring Scheme.

The feedback indicated that the programme had provided participants with a wide range of benefits and opportunities already. The majority of respondents had already identified ways in which they will apply their learning from the programme and reported that the programme had encouraged them to proactively manage their career, take more responsibility within the university and to seek out leadership roles. Of the ten participants, one has been promoted to a more senior role and one has left the university to take on a more senior role at another University.

The feedback also recommended three broad areas of institutional support for current and future participants in the programme: increased visibility within academic partner colleges and across the university, greater transparency of opportunities within the institution and continued engagement with the Learning and Teaching Academy (LTA) to support their professional development.

The evaluation concluded that there are significant benefits of participation in the Aurora Programme for women aspiring to take on leadership roles. The findings indicated that participants' core leadership skills and confidence had developed and, as a consequence, they were more likely to apply for senior roles within the partnership. On this basis, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Funding is made available for up to 10 participants on the 2019/20 Aurora Programme;
2. Future Aurora participation becomes as an integral part of the institutional action plans relating to Athena Swan Bronze Award and the Update to Equality Outcomes and Mainstreaming Report 2019;
3. LTA continues to take responsibility for the management of the programme within the University;
4. LTA continues to support the 2018/19 Aurora Programme participants to embed learning and build on the initial investment (including through the University Mentoring Scheme; LTA initiatives and events);



5. Further consideration is given to other relevant programmes of study and opportunities which build leadership capacity across the university;

2. AdvanceHE Aurora Leadership Development Programme

2.1. AdvanceHE Aurora Programme

The Aurora Programme is targeted at those who identify as women, in roles up to senior lecturer level or professional services equivalent. The programme encourages participants to think about themselves as leaders and includes four development days; self-directed learning activities; Aurora role models; action learning sets and a mentor through the University Mentoring Scheme.

Aurora continues to grow in reputation as a transformational programme. Research undertaken by Loughborough University has explored the impact of the programme to date and highlights that “there are strong indications of positive effects of Aurora” (LFHE 2016:9). Since it launched in 2013, over 5000 women have completed the programme from over 171 institutions across the UK and Ireland. One-fifth of the participants have been from Scottish HE institutions.

2.2. Approval of the University’s engagement with the Aurora Programme in 2018

Until 2018, the university had funded up to two places a year on Aurora, however awareness of the programme was not widespread and, as a result, these places were not always taken up. A small number of university colleagues had completed Aurora including Professor Elizabeth Cottier-Cook (Scottish Association for Marine Science, UHI) and Dr Sue Engstrand, Interim Dean of Science, Health and Engineering.

In 2018, a proposal was approved by Partnership Council to fund up to ten places on the 2018/19 programme at a maximum cost of £15,000. The proposal was a response to the ‘These Women Can’ Conference (8 March 2018) which had highlighted a demand from colleagues to participate in the programme. The aim of this investment was to encourage women to apply for senior roles within the partnership and also to deliver on the University’s Athena Swan Bronze Award action plan¹ by ensuring participation of up to two colleagues on the programme.

2.3. Management of the Aurora Programme by the LTA

Following approval, it was agreed that the LTA would take responsibility for managing the programme internally including the development of the application process, the promotion, selection and support for participants². The programme was advertised in September 2018 and 25 applications were received by the closing date. Applications were reviewed against a set of criteria and the selection of successful candidates was based on the evidence provided by applicants in their application forms. The selection

¹ “Action Point 12: The University commits to supporting the participation of two female staff per annum in the Aurora Leadership Programme (or equivalent provision through an alternative programme, where appropriate, relative to the needs of the individual staff member” (UHI 2016:44).

² The 2018/19 application form can be found in Appendix 10.1 and the application guidance in Appendix 10.2

panel was comprised of institutional Aurora Champions and those nominated by them to participate in the process. The panel members were:

Ann Tilbury	Academic Skills Developer, LTA
Elizabeth Cottier	Head of the SAMS-UNU Institutional Programme, Ecology: Processes
Fiona Larg	Chief Operating Officer and Company Secretary
Fiona MacLean	Vice-Chair of Court for the University of the Highlands and Islands and Chair of the Equality and Diversity in Governance Working Group
Sarah Burton	Board of Management, Inverness College UHI
Sue Engstrand	Interim Dean of Science, Health and Engineering

2.4. 2018-19 Aurora participants

The 2018-19 Aurora Programme ran from November 2018 to March 2019. The ten successful applicants came from a range of academic partner colleges and had a range of roles and leadership experience. They were:

Antonia Thomas, Lecturer, Archaeology, Humanities and Gaelic, Orkney College, UHI
Anna-Wendy Stevenson, Programme Leader, Lews Castle College, UHI
Diana Macleod, Lecturer, North Highland College, UHI
Fiona Gunn, Professional Development Manager, Inverness College, UHI
Helen Coker, Programme Leader, Inverness College, UHI
Jane Edwards, Student Engagement Officer, Perth College, UHI
Lindsay Vare, Geochemist, Scottish Association for Marine Science, UHI
Nicola Smith, Head of Careers and Employability, Executive Office, UHI
Rosemary McCormack, Head of Curriculum, Programme Leader, Moray College, UHI
Raeanne Miller, Postdoctoral Research Associate, Executive Office, UHI



Figure 1 Image of some of the Aurora Programme participants

3. Evaluation approach

The evaluation approach was designed to “evidence the value” (Bamber & Stefani: 2016:242) of funding ten colleagues to participate in the Aurora Programme in 2018/19 and aimed to “articulate more clearly ... both the tangible and intangible outcomes and effects of an investment” (Bamber & Stefani: 2016:243). By focussing on the perceived outcomes of the programme, the evaluation will encompass changes in participants’ outlooks, behaviours and practices shortly after completion of the programme. This approach is particularly appropriate when evaluating leadership development programmes where the effects are likely to be indirect, occurring over time and “be messy and difficult to capture in a demonstrable ‘cause-effect’ manner” (Jarvis et al 2013:33). By focusing on the developmental outcomes, the evaluation aimed to ascertain the extent to which those participating in the programme were more encouraged to apply for senior roles within the institution – the strategic institutional objective for participating in the programme.

The evaluation provides an exploration of the developmental value of the programme. Three key questions are addressed within the evaluation:

- 1) What have been the main developmental values of the programme to date?
- 2) What opportunities or enhancements have been made as a result of the programme?
- 3) What institutional support is required by programme participants to embed their learning following completion of the programme?

3.1. Methodology

To explore these questions a mixed-methods approach was chosen to combine quantitative and qualitative data. Two methods were used to gather data from participants: an online survey and a focus group. The focus group adopted an appreciative inquiry approach which enabled participants to collaboratively co-create their feedback through discussion and reflection. The inclusion of qualitative data was also particularly relevant to a study based on the perceptions of participants.

3.2. Survey instrument

The survey instrument³ aimed to provide a range of quantitative and qualitative data and included 20 items, the majority of the items were based on participants' personal perceptions and reflections on their experiences of the programme. To simplify the analysis some of these items were 'forced choice' in the form of drop down lists of options. These options were informed by evaluations of the Aurora Programme carried out by AdvanceHE and other HE institutions. To capture any additional feedback 'comments' fields were added which provided a rich source of qualitative data. The survey ran from 22 to 30 April and was completed by all participants.

3.3. Focus group

The focus group was held on 30th April 2019 with eight of the ten participants being able to come together (in person and via videoconference). The appreciate inquiry approach supported participants

³ A PDF of the survey instrument can be found in Appendix 10.3

to co-construct key feedback themes as a group. Three discussion activities formed the structure of the focus group:

1. Identify the 'high point' stories which demonstrate the value of the programme to date;
2. Describe the positive aspects of being part of a group of participants from the university;
3. Identify ways of building on the programme going forward.

An online bulletin board was used (with participant permission) to collate the feedback themes. This allowed for group discussion, note-taking and sharing by participants joining the session at a distance. A screen capture of the collation of feedback is included in the Appendix 10.4.

4. Findings

The data analysis indicated that all ten respondents reported the enormous developmental value of the Aurora programme. The three most highly valued aspects of the programme were the content of the development days; the opportunity to build both internal and external networks and the provision of a mentor through the University Mentoring Scheme and these are explored in detailed below.

The findings indicate that the programme provided a highly positive experience which created a sense of confidence, collaboration and momentum. This positive feedback continued to be a feature of the cohort throughout the evaluation activities. The following quotes highlight this:

"The programme exceeded my expectations. Learning points were gleaned from conversations and hints and tips discussed with colleagues and by programme speakers."

"It was fantastic to meet like-minded colleagues from the UHI and across Scotland and I feel that the programme has given me more confidence to apply for a leadership role in the future."

"Excellent programme with inspiring development days packed with information and leads to support further learning."

An example of this increased confidence was the participants' presentation at International Women's Day 2019 where they presented a short video on their Aurora programme experience and facilitated a reflective activity informed by their learning on the programme. This was enthusiastically received by the delegates.



Figure 2 Image of graphic facilitation of Aurora presentation at IWD 2019

4.1. Developmental values of the programme content and format

All survey respondents reported that the programme met or exceeded their expectations. In the survey instrument, respondents were given a list of aspects of the programme and asked to rank them in order from most to least beneficial to them so far. The most beneficial aspect of the programme selected by respondents were the four development days, held in Edinburgh with over 200 delegates at each day. The development days were themed and included: identity, impact and voice; power and politics; core and adaptive leadership skills.

Respondents were also asked to select the statements that apply to their own experience of participating in the programme (based on aspects already identified by AdvanceHE evaluation reports). As Figure 3 illustrates, all respondents reported that the programme had increased their confidence in their leadership capabilities. A majority also stated that the programme had improved their social skills for leadership and encouraged them to seek out new responsibilities within the university.

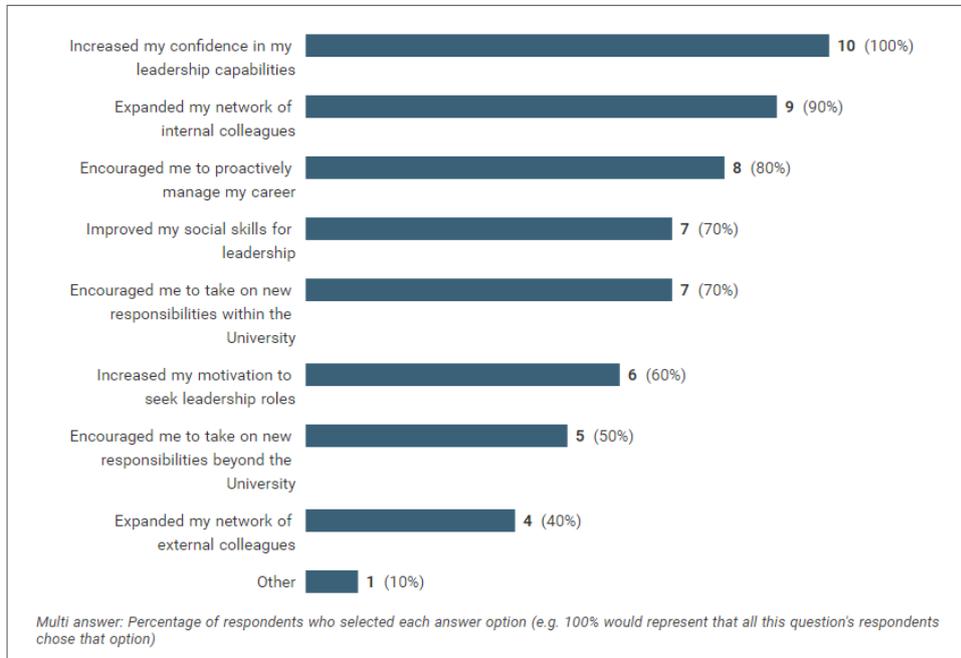


Figure 3 Ranked responses on the beneficial aspects of the Aurora Programme

Co-created feedback from the focus group echoed the value of the Aurora Programme format and approach which encouraged an exploration of leadership which participants reported as having “*encouraged people to be open and honest about their issues and to speak frankly about them*”. The strong emphasis on values and behaviours in leadership practice was a recurring theme in the feedback. The focus group also highlighted the value of having time to reflect as part of the process of building confidence and the importance of understanding “*how the organisation works*” in relation to identifying and optimising potential opportunities and professional pathways.

4.2. Building of an internal network of colleagues

The second most beneficial aspects of the programme was networking opportunities with internal colleagues. This was seen as particularly valuable in the context of a geographically distributed university. In addition, this aspect was also chosen as the most likely to be of value going forward.

This feedback was echoed in the focus group where internal networking opportunities were viewed as “*paramount [for] a group of professional leaders*” and regarded as significant in supporting a greater “*understanding how the organisation works*”. Respondents reported that participating in the programme broke down the barriers of distance and isolation which can be an aspect of working in a geographically distributed university.

Respondents also reported that the positive aspects of participating as a group included the development of a strong sense of belonging; of being a part of a “*critical mass*” drawn from a “*broad spread from across the partnership means we reflect the nature of the university*”. The size of the group



was seen as *“big enough so that the group maintains cohesion”* and importantly for them, *“lessens the sense of isolation in a geographically distributed university”*. In addition, the *“diversity of roles within the group also supported a greater understanding of the organisation.”*

4.3. Building of an external network of colleagues

The third most beneficial aspect of the programme was networking with external colleagues. As with internal networks, respondents reported that the new external networks created through participation in the programme, developed a greater sense of the value of diversity and created a sense of a *“commonality of issues”*. In addition, being part of the Aurora Programme broadens their horizons; *“puts their own University experiences into perspective within the wider HE sector”* and provided an opportunity for participants to be Ambassadors for the university – particularly in a context where there was a *“great degree of interest”* in the University. The Aurora Programme provided participants with the *“opportunity to demonstrate the passion and professionalism of the University”*.

4.4. Provision of a mentor

The provision of an institutional mentor is an integral part of the Aurora Programme and supports the programme participants to explore and identify goals in discussion with their mentor on completion of the programme. Mentors were allocated through the University mentoring scheme with a number of the selection panel members becoming mentors. Feedback from the survey and the focus group indicated that for some of the respondents, the mentoring relationship was highly valued and was perceived as a cornerstone in building confidence and maintaining momentum. For some, however, they had yet to fully engage with the mentoring process and this will be monitored as part of the ongoing evaluation of the University mentoring scheme. Some participants have already indicated that they will become mentors on the scheme particularly to support colleagues on future Aurora programmes.

4.5. Enhancements to professional practice as a result of the programme

Respondents to the survey indicated that the majority had already identified ways in which they will apply their learning from the programme. These included:

“Using learning from the development days to lead their team through an internal validation”,

“Managing my time better and devot[ing] more time to reflection and organisation, so I can prioritise and work more effectively, rather than working longer and antisocial hours”

“More inclined to speak up and express my ideas more confidently at meetings with senior managers”.

Of the ten participants, one has been promoted to a more senior role and one has left the university to take on a more senior role at another University.

Respondents to the survey were also asked to anticipate future opportunities to further build on what they had learned on the programme. Responses included *“drawing greatly on my Aurora experience in*



a new, more senior role”; “enhancing the support provided for PHD students” and “applying for an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Leadership Fellow grant”.

4.6. In their own words

In recognition of an evaluation approach which encompasses the aspirational nature of leadership development and demonstrates the importance of intangible benefits such as a growing confidence, a sense of self-worth and a greater feeling of belonging, the programme participants were asked to provide quotes which describe the value of the programme to their professional practice to date. These quotes can be found below:

“Aurora has enabled me to develop my leadership capacity and given me practical skills I have been able to enact regularly in my role as programme leader.”

“In short, I feel more confident in my own abilities, perhaps the most valuable aspect of the programme for me was the validation I gained for my own leadership approach”.

“I am a lot more confident when talking to staff during staff meetings and I have a lot of different ideas to help me to continue to develop myself to become a better manager”.

“Aurora was excellent. It has provided new and helpful perspectives on both my career and on the university sector. I now have a better understanding of what motivates me, and I feel more confident in my ability to succeed”.

“This was a really brilliant opportunity and one I am delighted to have been selected for. AURORA raises the profile of female leadership and enables you to embark in some great professional networking and self-belief as a leader. Thank you UHI for affording me this opportunity and for providing me with a great forward thinking mentor ...”.

“The Aurora programme has already had a huge impact on me; it really has helped me to grow in confidence and have faith in my own abilities (something that I question far more than I should). It has been very refreshing to explore my own feelings and doubts in a safe and supportive environment and realise that I am like so many other females in the University sector. The programme has helped me to identify my strengths and weaknesses as a leader and most importantly has given me the tools to try and make me both a better leader and mentor.”

“I went to find out about leadership. Instead I discovered being an influencer. I found that far more profound and important to me”.

“The Aurora programme challenged my lack of confidence in myself as a leader and caused me to realise that I can lead and make an impact on my organisation. It also helped me to identify the specific areas that I want to develop my career in”.

“We are all leaders in our own lives, but the Aurora programme allows you to develop those skills for the wider world”.

“Aurora connected me to colleagues within the university I possibly would not have met otherwise. I gained a deeper understanding and appreciation of the diversity within our institution. Participation in Aurora gave the opportunity to engage in reflection on my own position - through discussion, examining value systems and employment and college structures. Connecting with colleagues, I was able to gain a different perspective on my position. Since participating in Aurora I have stepped into new roles with increased confidence, joining the board of an arts centre and have been promoted within my college giving me greater leadership responsibility”.



Figure 4 Aurora Notebook and development day programme

In summary, the findings from the data analysis indicated that all ten respondents reported the enormous developmental value of the Aurora programme. Their feedback has provided a rich diversity in the benefits and opportunities the programme has afforded to date.

4.7. Perceived institutional barriers to embedding learning

The longitudinal evaluation of the Aurora Programme carried out by AdvanceHE has already indicated that whilst leadership and career development programmes have a positive impact on women’s career development, a number of institutional barriers often exist. To explore whether these particular barriers were experienced by the ten participants, the survey instrument asked them to consider the same list of institutional barriers and to select those which were relevant to their own leadership aspirations. The majority of respondents (7/10) selected the lack of opportunity to utilise new skills developed from the programme with half (5/10) selecting a lack of supportive institutional workplace culture and practices as institutional barriers to career development.

4.8. Perceived personal barriers to embedding learning

Existing evaluation reports of the Aurora programme have also indicated that a number personal barriers inhibit participants’ ability to apply new learning and skills from the programme. The majority of survey respondents (7/10) selected ‘a lack of identification of potential opportunities’ and 3/10 selected ‘balance between home and working life’ as personal barriers. This reflected the wider evaluation reports of the Aurora programme (Barnard et al 2017).



4.9. Suggested institutional initiatives to support programme participants

The feedback from both the focus group and the survey instrument highlighted a number of suggestions for institutional initiatives to support Aurora programme participant to apply their new skills. These are listed below under three broad themes: increased visibility within academic partner colleges and across the university, greater transparency of opportunities and further engagement with the LTA.

4.9.1. Increased visibility through recognition and engagement

Institutional recognition and support was highlighted as one of the most important factors in maintaining and building on the value of the Aurora Programme. A range of suggestions were made including opportunities to increase visibility through celebrating, recognising and supporting participants to share their knowledge and experience:

- within academic partner colleges, perhaps at graduation ceremonies or staff conferences;
- across the university, perhaps at pan-university conferences and events such as the Research and Learning and Teaching Conference;
- through LTA events; webinars and schemes including the University Mentoring Scheme;
- through existing networks such as the women's network;
- establish a student award for a project which aims to develop leadership skills of UHI students.

4.9.2. Greater transparency of potential opportunities

A number of suggestions were made in relation to potential opportunities for Aurora Programme participants to apply their learning. These included:

- Increasing awareness of potential career development opportunities and pathways for progression in the University;
- Increasing line manager awareness of the Aurora Programme and the type of support they could provide for the Aurora participants they line manage;
- Increasing awareness of potential opportunities beyond the university;
- Developing opportunities to utilise new skills developed from the programme;
- Increasing supportive institutional workplace culture and practices.

4.9.3. Further engagement with the LTA

Survey respondents were asked to suggest how the LTA could support them to apply the new skills and knowledge gained from the programme. The main suggestions were to:

- Provide a mechanism for the programme participants to develop as a network via hosting meetings / webinars / talks;
- Draw on the expertise of the programme participants in leadership development initiatives;
- Continue to embed support for programme participants through engagement with the university mentoring scheme

5. Conclusions from analysis



The research conducted to date on the AdvanceHE Aurora programme has indicated that participants have described lasting and significant benefits including internal promotion or moves to other institutions (Barnard et al 2017). The evaluation of the 2018/19 cohort has indicated similar positive findings. Within a month of completion of the programme, two of the participants have moved into more senior roles (although one is external to the University) both of whom cited the Aurora programme as a contributory factor in this recent professional progression.

The findings of the analysis indicated that all ten participants found the Aurora programme to be hugely valuable for their current and future development of their professional practice. The feedback indicated a greater sense of confidence, a desire to develop professional practice and make a positive contribution to the university by programme participants. In addition the feedback indicated participants were developing their own unique approach to leadership which focuses on their professional values and an “*understanding of different leadership roles and styles*”. Finally the feedback indicated an increased sense of belonging by all the programme participants – this was regarded as hugely valuable in the context of a geographically distributed university.

6. Limitations of the evaluation

There were a number of limitations to evaluation of the 2018/19 Aurora Programme. Key among these is the challenging of evaluating whether the programme has ‘encouraged women to apply for senior roles within the partnership’. It is clearly too early to gauge and further evaluation will be required at a later stage. Secondly the evaluation has focused instead on the perceptions of the programme participants on the benefits to date and the anticipated future benefits of the programme. Feedback has not yet been systematically sought from stakeholders or mentors although useful reflections were gathered from panel members during the selection process and are included in the Appendix 10.6.

Given the longitudinal nature of leadership development it will be necessary to evaluate the outcomes of programme participation over time to fully understand the developmental value of the programme (Gentle 2014). Moreover, in line with research on leadership development initiatives, a key factor in the success of programmes is the support provided to participants to embed their learning and apply their new skills within the context of their professional practice (Avolio et al 2009). Supporting the embedding of learning from the programme going forward and seeking feedback from the Aurora participants in the future will support the exploration of the longitudinal aspects of the programme.

7. Gender inequality in leadership positions in Higher Education

As has been well documented, perceived persistent gender inequality in the senior ranks of universities still exists. Morley's research on the number of senior leadership roles in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) highlighted that although 44% of academics were women, only 19% were in professorial roles, and only 28% were in senior management roles (Morley 2013: 15). Her research findings were instrumental in the creation of the Aurora Programme. The Update to Equality Outcomes and Mainstreaming Report reports the University has a mean gender pay gap of 22% in favour of men. It

notes that through “support for women on the Aurora Leadership Programme, we hope to encourage more female applicants to senior posts” (Hall 2019:51).

“The Aurora Programme would contribute to building capacity in educational leadership across the institution and create a cohort of colleagues who could not only be supported by the LTA to embed their learning following the completion of the programme, but who could play a significant role in promoting and engaging other colleagues in learning and teaching professional development initiatives”.

8. Recommendations arising from the evaluation of the Aurora Programme

The findings of the evaluation indicates the significant benefits of the Aurora Programme in building confidence and skills in leadership and that those participants were more likely to proactively manage their career, take more responsibility within the university and to seek out leadership roles. Of the ten participants, one has been promoted to a more senior role and one has left the university to take on a more senior role at another University.

On the basis of the findings of the evaluation, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Continued support is provided to the 2018/19 Aurora Programme participants to embed learning and build on the initial investment (including through the University Mentoring Scheme; LTA initiatives and events);
2. Funding is made available for up to 10 participants on the 2019/20 Aurora Programme;
3. Consideration is given to other relevant programmes of study and opportunities which build leadership capacity;
4. Develop the Aurora Programme as an integral part of the institutional action plans relating to Athena Swan Bronze Award and the Update to Equality Outcomes and Mainstreaming Report 2019.

9. References

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10. Appendix

10.1. Application form



Application
form_Aurora Progra

Figure 5 Aurora Programme Application Form

10.2. Application guidance



applicant_guidance
_aurora_programme

Figure 6 Aurora Programme Applicant Guidance

10.3. Survey instrument



Survey
questionnaire.pdf

Figure 7 Survey questionnaire



However, a number of refinements were identified by the selection panel members which would improve the process, for example, providing an earlier launch of the programme with a longer; revisions to the application form to include a “current role” field; more guidance to applicants and line managers on the Aurora Programme aims and expectations and on how to provide supporting statements; and more time for panel members to review applications. These will be implemented going forward, if programme funding is sourced for 2019/20.