The Higher Education White Paper: Students at the Heart of the System

An early response from the Society of Biology to the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills

July 2011

Summary:

1. **The White Paper's proposals on undergraduate fees and repayment mechanisms, alongside HEFCE contribution to teaching funding and controls on undergraduate numbers introduce great uncertainty into the higher education (HE) sector and will usher in a period of considerable turmoil and unpredictability. The most likely outcomes are undesirable reductions a) in numbers of biological sciences graduates, b) in range and diversity of biological sciences degree programmes and c) in opportunities for disadvantaged school students to proceed to study biological sciences in HE.**
2. **By focusing completely on undergraduate teaching and funding issues, the White Paper neglects the complex inter-relationship between undergraduate teaching, postgraduate teaching and research in many universities. The likeliest outcomes are undesirable reductions a) in the opportunities for biological sciences undergraduates to study in an environment that is informed by high-quality research and b) in the involvement of research-active academics in undergraduate teaching.**

HEFCE teaching funding and student numbers

The proposals made in the White Paper will result in much uncertainty for higher education institutes (HEIs) over the future funding situation and the sector faces a substantial period of turmoil and unpredictability. HEIs now have to plan in the absence of information on the value of the teaching grant per student in each subject area or on the impact of the greatly increased tuition fees and the proposals to reduce student number controls.

It is vitally important to continue to fund subjects such as biology, despite the higher costs of these subjects, in order to provide graduates that possess the appropriate knowledge and skills for research careers, ensuring we maintain the science base of the UK. The Society welcomes the HEFCE consultation on the allocation of the teaching grant and student number controls.

While there is uncertainty around the HEFCE teaching funding allocation, the proposals to lift the caps on student numbers could have a significant negative impact on biology course provision and recruitment. Bioscience subjects are costly to teach, and there are few cheap options for teaching them well, principally due to the vital elements of laboratory and fieldwork. HEFCE must continue to provide funding to support

Charles Darwin House, 12 Roger Street, London, WC1N 2JU Tel: +44 (0)20 7685 2550
info@societyofbiology.org www.societyofbiology.org

the higher costs of degrees with laboratory and field work costs such as in the biosciences; the evidence is that the cost differential is considerably greater than the £1500 per student per year that appears to be envisaged. At this inadequate level of HEFCE support, and with HEIs competing freely for the students with the highest exam results (above AAB at A level or equivalent), there is a real risk that HEIs may prioritise recruiting high-performing students to non-STEM areas where the cost of teaching more closely matches the income available.

A further and distinct concern is that by making additional student places available for institutions that charge fees of less than £7,500, some institutions may be dis-incentivised from offering more expensive courses such as the sciences, or may be incentivised to offer programmes with little or poor quality practical content to keep costs down. These proposals could initiate unwelcome diversity in provision by incentivising the development of a low-cost, low-quality element to the HE sector. This will damage the quality of science teaching overall and limit the opportunities for many potential students to attend institutions that deliver high-quality research-led teaching.

Divisions between teaching and research

The White Paper acknowledges that '*this reform focuses on higher education teaching but our universities have a much wider role'*. However, by publishing the White Paper now and holding back its strategy for research and innovation to be published as a separate document later this year, the Government reveals its lack of joined-up thinking on this issue. In science departments in most HEIs, there is an intricate relationship between teaching and research, in terms of space and facilities, financial sustainability, academic staff time and workload, and the supply chain of new researchers.

The White Paper emphasises the need to improve the quality of undergraduate tuition, but this pressure combined with a Research Excellence Framework that does not incentivise or recognise teaching, is likely to lead to emergence of divisions between those academics who focus on research and those with teaching responsibility. The Society of Biology is keen to recognise institutions that reward the combination of excellent teaching and excellent research, and the Society will soon be launching an annual award for excellence in teaching in higher education, based on the Bioscience Teacher of the Year Award, previously offered by the UK Centre for Biosciences.

Similarly, there is little in the White Paper to address postgraduate studies and support. With the increased costs of undergraduate study, many students may feel unable to afford to continue into postgraduate study, leading to negative repercussions for the research base in the future and on the long term health of the UK economy.

Key Information Set

We welcome proposals to provide students with further information to enable them to make informed decisions about their education. However, we believe that the real value in these data will only be realised if is disseminated widely and effectively to all students, parents, teachers and schools at various education stages. We wish to see from BIS proposals on how the Government will ensure that all interested parties are able to access and make use of this information.

We gratefully acknowledge the contributions of the Society of Biology's Council and Education, Training and Policy Committee; the Heads of University Biological Sciences; the British Ecological Society; and the Genetics Society.

The Society of Biology will be submitting a full response to the Consultation on the proposals made in the HE White Paper. If you would like to feed into this response then please contact Eva Sharpe, HE Policy Officer at the Society of Biology. Email: evasharpe@societyofbiology.org

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