Recruiting, funding and communicating

A report of the Biochemical Society’s annual meeting for Heads of Department, held at the Institute of Physics on 5 May 2004.

by Mike Withnall
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Anne McFarlane began the meeting by explaining that the Office of Science and Technology (OST) is interested in recruitment and retention because UK industrial performance depends on a strong supply of graduates and postdocs.

She reminded the audience that the Roberts Review in 2002 found that careers in science, engineering and technology are not attractive, because science is perceived as difficult, science careers have a poor image, there is poor financial reward, it is an uncertain career path, and there are weak development opportunities.

She then looked at how the OST is dealing with some of these problems, with increased PhD stipends and new postdoc salaries, and the new academic fellowship scheme. Other current initiatives included the review of dual support to ensure that universities recover the full costs of research that they perform, the review of best practice for PhD training, and the creation of a funders’ forum to take forward the Research Careers Initiative.

Over the next 5–10 years, the OST would like to see a reduction in the proportion of academic researchers on short-term contracts, better structures in universities for careers guidance and appraisal of young researchers, and improved continuing professional development.

Points from the floor included criticism of a lack of joined-up thinking across government departments, with instances cited of departments not agreeing to pay the full costs of research that they commission, and even the OST’s new academic fellowship scheme not paying full overheads. It was also pointed out that salary progression in academic science needs to be addressed, not just initial salaries. The speaker replied that it is difficult to argue this case to the Treasury, which sees simply that there is no great problem with the supply of postdocs wanting to stay in academia.

Tom Sastry was a late replacement for Rama Thirunamachandran of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), and chose to limit his talk to the procedures for the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in 2008. Most of the audience would have been familiar with the framework, but the talk gave an opportunity to probe some of the detail. He was quizzed on whether he could give an assurance that applied research would be dealt with more equitably in 2008, and went through the steps that HEFCE is introducing, without fully convincing the questioner. It was also suggested that the panel configurations recommended by HEFCE do not reflect the way that research is actually organized.

Sastry replied that HEFCE had not wanted to change too much the Units of Activity and configurations with which universities are familiar, but it was quite prepared to respond to views expressed by the academic community. He did not escape without being pressed on the inadequacy of the weighting applied to the teaching of science subjects in universities, about which both the Biochemical Society and the Biosciences Federation have complained. Sastry responded that HEFCE has very little scope to change the overall size of the funding pot, and any change for science would impact on other subjects. He argued, rather, that there is a case for applying a policy factor to science subjects to ensure that there is adequate provision for shortage subjects (principally the physical sciences).

Colin Blakemore wanted the Medical Research Council (MRC) to be more consultative, inclusive and transparent, and to focus on younger researchers, clinical research, reviewing funding streams and engaging with the public. He saw his own appointment, as a controversial communicator, as recognition that the MRC wants to engage more. Regarding
funding schemes, he said that feedback from the roadshows that the MRC organized indicated that the research community wants simple and flexible grants, fewer schemes, improved grant assessment, and streamlined processing. The rest of the talk explained how the MRC is achieving these objectives.

The afternoon session on communicating with different audiences was a little more experimental. Lisa Jamieson explained that the Dana Centre aims to be the hub of contact between scientists and the public, ‘the equivalent of the nineteenth century coffee houses’. It tries to attract an audience of independent, culturally active, racially mixed adults between 18 and 45, who are not scientists. Research shows that the parent Science Museum does not appeal to this population. To bring in the public, it uses a wide range of formats, including debates and discussions, shows and events, all of which have to be topical, controversial and relevant. During questions, she said that on the three nights of the week on which the centre opens, it averages about 60–70 visitors. They are mostly under 50, and from the types of question that visitors ask, she judges that many are graduates. The need for such initiatives outside the capital was remarked.

Richard Smith’s subject had the potential to be boring, but in reality the talk was interesting and informative. The government places great stress on the need to improve interactions between universities and industry, and the speaker outlined the role of the industry-led Sector Skills Council for the Science, Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies Alliance (SEMTA) in this. Employers see crowded and confusing provision of higher-level courses, too many different qualifications — which they would like to have simplified, and too many government agencies introducing too many initiatives. SEMTA aims to bridge the gap between universities, employers and government by helping each to understand the others’ needs. For example, it is represented on the Biosciences Leadership Council, it is working to develop performance measures with the biotech industry, it is collaborating with HEFCE and the Learning and Teaching Support Network to discourage the proliferation of poor-quality hybrid science degree courses; and with Universities UK to improve collaboration between higher education and industry.

During discussion, the question of what type of graduates industry needs was raised. A delegate from the pharmaceutical industry said excellent basic scientists with good practical expertise; he noted that it is a problem for universities to provide practical training because they are underfunded. The speaker commented that funding is not raised as a major issue by members of the Higher Education Liaison Group that he attends. A straw poll of the audience found that a majority agreed that universities are trying to train too many biosciences students, and are not doing it well.

The Royal Society of Chemistry (RSC) is very effective at getting its message across to parliamentarians, largely due to the work of Stephen Benn. He advised the audience that science has to compete for attention with many other lobbies, but recommended that the community do the communication itself rather than employ a lobbying company. It is important to establish a long-lasting relationship with MPs, such as that of the RSC Parliamentary Links Scheme in which every MP is paired with an RSC member in his or her constituency. A one-off approach is of limited value — it should be followed up with other help or advice in order to establish a relationship.

It is also important to minimize the number of voices speaking for a branch of science in order to make it simpler for MPs, and to work with others where possible. A good strategy is to find out what individual MPs are interested in, and then try to angle the approach to them to tie in with their interests.

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**Programme of the HODs meeting**

**Teaching and research policy**
- Dr Anne McFarlane (Office of Science and Technology): Recruitment and retention in academic science
- Mr Thomas Sastry (Higher Education Funding Council for England): HEFCE’s future funding policies
- Professor Colin Blakemore (Medical Research Council): MRC: the next 5 years

**Communicating with different audiences**
- Ms Lisa Jamieson (Dana Centre, London): Novel ways of communicating science with adults
- Mr Richard Smith (Sector Skills Council): Interacting with industry
- Dr Stephen Benn (Royal Society of Chemistry): Communicating with Parliament