

Society of Biology – the first months

Dr Mark Downs (Chief Executive, Society of Biology)

As most readers will be aware, the Society of Biology formally came into existence on 1 October 2009 following the unification of the Biosciences Federation and the Institute of Biology. Although we plan to build on the heritage of these two important bodies, it is important for all of us to see the Society as a new organization with a different outlook and approach to its organizational parents.

For the first time, we have one body to represent the interests of all biologists in the UK, creating a single powerful voice to advise and inform governments and make a difference. That aspiration can only be realized if we are a nimble organization, quick to respond to opportunities, capable of learning from our mistakes and willing to work in partnership. We also need to be truly proactive to really drive the policy agenda.

At the time of writing this article, we will be less than 6 months old and there will still be plenty of opportunity to shape the way we work. But, to do that, we need to understand what matters to our members, how you will judge if we are delivering for you and how best to involve you. Any member of the team here would be delighted to hear your thoughts and, as the newest recruit, I am particularly keen to learn about the way your organization would like to be represented by us.

The Society now has over 70 Organizational Members and nearly 12000 Individual Members. This represents 80000 biologists, giving us the legitimacy to speak with authority in all our work.

Our Council has identified four priority areas for 2010.

First, practical biology. No matter which biological discipline undergraduates or postgraduates follow, there needs to be the opportunity to practise science at the bench or in the field. It is simply not tenable to expand undergraduate science education without additional resource to facilitate hands-on experience of designing real experiments and interpreting the results. As Keith Gull, Professor of Molecular Biology at Oxford University and Council member of the Society of Biology, said in a recent interview to the London *Evening Standard* responding to Lord Mandelson's announcement on spending cuts: "A perfect storm is gathering. Our next generation of scientists will need to look very carefully at the quality of degrees on offer. If we want to train top scientists – to innovate, to find out fundamental truths and to get us out of a recession – this is simply not good enough."

There has to be the resource to properly fund practical biology both in schools and in the higher education sector. We will be pushing this message at every opportunity, especially in the run up to the election.

Secondly, the impact of biology; a central theme in the recent consultation on the Research Excellence Framework. Most biologists accept that the public have a right to know that the money they spend on research is being spent wisely. Its impact on our economy, health care system, environment and society is important to recognize. But it has to be a sophisticated measurement. We plan to build on existing work and present a consistent and clear case around the impact of biology from blue-sky research to the most applied. Case studies will be an important part of that. If you have data or views to share, please email me at markdowns@societyofbiology.org.

Thirdly, we will continue to work on a pilot accreditation programme

The Society of Biology is a single unified voice for biology:

- advising Government and influencing policy
- advancing education and professional development
- supporting our members
- engaging and encouraging public interest in the life sciences

to report back to the Office for Life Sciences. The Government has asked us to look at ways in which some biological science degrees can be accredited to give greater confidence to students and employers that they provide the solid grounding needed for employment.

There is no doubt that the topic arouses strong views. The academic community doesn't want to be forced into a corner with no room for innovation in their degree programmes or to become a surrogate for technical training programmes, while industry bemoans the lack of hands-on laboratory skills of many graduates. I am convinced there is a route to delivery of a solution that meets the needs of both camps. A lot rests with the terminology used. Any accreditation programme we take forward will benefit from wider consultation and will certainly not be compulsory. It is likely to focus on core requirements for biological science courses to be accredited, such as numerical content, experimental design, opportunity for hands-on experimentation and intellectual rigour. It is certainly not about accrediting individuals or asking for coverage of specific training tasks or a defined list of techniques. For sure, biology is more diverse than chemistry or engineering, but by starting in specific areas real benefit can accrue, along with experience. To find out, more visit www.societyofbiology.org.

Finally, we will, of course, be talking to all the parties in the run up to the general election, forcing them to focus on their science agenda and representing the interests of biology, raising its profile and using our work on 'impact' to argue for investment.

The Society will also be working on many wider education, science policy and public understanding of science issues and, of course, trying to evolve new services to benefit our members. We welcome your suggestions for the Society. ■



Mark joined the Society as its first CEO in November 2009. He has a varied background spanning the academic, voluntary, private and public sectors. He was previously Executive Director of Science and Enterprise and member of the Board for the RNID, a major UK charity representing 9 million people with hearing loss, where he led their medical and technical research programme alongside the managing Director role for two RNID Social Enterprises covering both product retail and service delivery. He has been a Government regulator for environmental legislation and led Whitehall negotiations in Brussels. He worked for 5 years in the Diplomatic Service in Japan covering trade policy and has previously worked on UK science policy. He has a degree in Biotechnology and a PhD in DNA biosensors. email: markdowns@societyofbiology.org