Diversity and the Biochemical Society

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Diversity issues have been on our minds here at the Biochemical Society of late. Like many within the science community, we’re concerned that certain groups within UK society face barriers and are often disadvantaged when pursuing a career in the biosciences.

Individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds, certain ethnic minorities, women and people with disabilities are all currently under-represented in education, training and employment related to the biosciences. The Society recognizes that under-representation may be across the molecular biosciences as a whole, or may be concentrated at different career stages, significantly at more senior levels. For example, disabled people are under-represented in the scientific workforce as a whole while women face barriers further up the career ladder; in 2011/2012, 61% of bioscience postgraduate students were female while only 15% of professors were female.

At the Biochemical Society, we believe that the scientific workforce should reflect the make-up of UK society. The moral and ethical justifications for this position are obvious; however, there is also a well-established and powerful business case for supporting increased equality and diversity in the science workforce. For a more detailed analysis of this, see the Royal Society’s 2014 report on A Picture of the UK Scientific Workforce.

The Biochemical Society has a strong history of working in the area of women in science; however, we have now broadened our focus on gender equality to diversity in the molecular bioscience community. We support the view that in order for the sector to change we need to fully understand how and why inequalities arise and persist in science and ensure that the challenges and complexities of removing these inequalities are recognized by individuals throughout the career pyramid. This includes the ‘mainstreaming’ of diversity issues amongst the management of research institutes, universities and industry, in order that such issues are routinely considered when taking decisions. We acknowledge that there is no ‘quick fix’ for the problems that exist, but that eventually the biases that exist may be eliminated.

We are committed to raising the profile of diversity issues amongst our networks and to decision-makers as well as addressing issues within our own organization. As such, we have created a new equality and diversity strategy which will enable us to meet these goals. Amongst a number of initiatives we will look at the diversity of our membership, including the recipients of our medals and awards, and the gender balance of speakers at our conferences. We have also altered the focus of our Stay Connected Bursaries as well as creating a new series of Diversity in Science Grants.

The criteria for our Stay Connected Bursaries, launched as part of Women in Biochemistry Year 2013, have been widened to allow men or women experiencing a career break to attend one of our Society’s conferences, workshops or training days. Whether it is through caring responsibilities, illness or unemployment, the Biochemical Society acknowledges that a career break can occur for a number of reasons and that it is vital to remain up to date with the latest developments in order to successfully return to a career in the biosciences. Often extended career breaks are cited as a reason for the lack of women in senior positions in the scientific community. The bursaries cover the cost of registration, accommodation and care provider cover. Further details can be found on our website (www.biochemistry.org/Grants/StayConnectedBursaries.aspx).

The Society recently launched a series of new Diversity in Science grants. This scheme will provide three grants of up to £500 to individuals, groups, charities or businesses to support and address issues relating to diversity in science. Initiatives such as research proposals, conferences, events and roadshows will all be considered as well as other projects; the grants are not designed to support members on an individual basis. The deadline for applications is 30 September 2014 and successful applicants will be informed by 31 October 2014. Further details can be found on our website (www.biochemistry.org/SciencePolicy/Diversity.aspx).

The Biochemical Society believes that it is vital that no-one experiences a barrier to entering a career in the molecular biosciences. Watch this space for future activities and initiatives.

References
1. www.hesa.ac.uk/stats