Representing the sector in HE and research policy

The Society has been working hard to understand and express the views of our Membership Organizations as part of our higher education and research policy work. We have recently been examining the proposed Teaching Excellence Framework and the outcomes of the important Nurse and Wakeham reviews.

In January we responded to the BIS Higher Education green paper, which covered teaching excellence, social mobility and student choice, including valuable input from the Biochemical Society and many of our member organisations.

The Society supported the Government’s overarching aims to raise the status and standard of teaching; support higher education teachers and increase transparency for students, teachers and employers. However, we were able to strongly reflect the sector view that the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in its proposed form would not achieve these objectives and that the proposed timetable for roll-out was too short.

We have also had high level engagement from our committees, special interest groups and Member Organisations on the response to the TEF technical consultation. We are supportive of the aims of the TEF but were concerned about the proposed metrics, burden on academics and impact on the UK’s reputation as an international leader in higher education.

Released on the same day was a HE and Research white paper, featuring the TEF roll-out, financial incentives, market competition, student choice and research structure. We have recently produced a briefing which condenses the 83 page ‘Higher education: success as a knowledge economy’ white paper into five pages – to help those who wish to contribute to our work engaging with the accompanying Higher Education and Research Bill as it now goes to the Public Bill Committee.

STEM graduates are critical to the UK economy but some STEM courses do not have a strong graduate employment record. The Government commissioned an independent review led by Sir William Wakeham to help better understand the situation. The Biochemical Society and our other Membership Organisations have voiced concerns about the report’s conclusion that bioscience subjects have poorer employability than other STEM subjects, as the data on this is not particularly robust.

Wakeham also points this out – and thus we hope to help counter the potentially damaging message to prospective bioscience undergraduates about future employment. The report recognises that accreditation of Degrees can have an important role to play in showing employers that STEM graduates can meet the needs of business and industry. The RSB’s programme was only introduced recently and needs time to develop long term impact, so we will be actively engaging with the more detailed reviews of subjects Wakeham recommends.

Across the whole education and training agenda, the Education Policy Advisory Group has been integral in supporting the RSB bringing together member organisation views. Also collaborations with our special interest groups such as the Heads of University Biosciences and the Biology Education Research Group have provided us with the expertise needed to inform our responses and ensure that we represent the sectors interests.

The HE White Paper and the Bill set out principles and practical detail about the reorganisation of the Research Councils, Innovate UK and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (which currently administers the Research Excellence Framework). A new body UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) will be created to gather together the Research Councils, Innovate UK and a new body Research England. A reconfigured Council for Science and Technology will provide an interface instead of the originally proposed Ministerial Committee, but this will be kept under review. The Government has listened to ours, and others, strong defence of the Haldane Principle and the importance of peer review informed dual support but there is a great deal more to consider in terms of the operation of the research support system. It is vitally important to get the input of the sector to get this right.

In the wake of the EU Referendum results we are working hard to ensure Government understands the implications of Brexit for bioscience. You can also get in touch with our policy team on policy@rsb.org.uk if you would like to share views ahead of their response to the House of Commons Science and Technology Select Committee’s inquiry into ‘Leaving the EU: implications and opportunities for science and research’.

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