Royal Society of Biology News

Looking to the future for innovation and research

The triggering of Article 50 means we now have a very tangible and definitive timeline for the UK’s exit of the EU. In this time, the Royal Society of Biology will be working to represent the priorities of our members in the forthcoming negotiations, not only to ensure the best possible deals are achieved for scientists based in the UK, but also for those wishing to join in the future.

Looking towards the future has been a theme running through some of the RSB events this year. In March we saw Voice of the Future, a unique event that allows school children through to early career researchers pitch their questions to the government’s top science policymakers and politicians, right in the heart of Westminster.

Young researchers, representing a wide cross section of membership organisations including the Biochemical Society, we able to discuss science policy with Jo Johnson MP, Sir Mark Walport, Chi Onwurah MP and a selection of members of the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee. It was encouraging to see young representatives asking meaningful and thought provoking questions; questions that were indicative of their enthusiasm for science and research.

Earlier in the same week we were at Portcullis House, this time for STEM for Britain. This year saw the largest number of submissions ever from researchers wishing to take part, with over 250 STEM scientists presenting their research to MPs, policymakers and other academics. It was especially exciting to see a biologist receive the highest accolade of the event – the Westminster medal – for her research on developing a cost-effective device for the rapid detection of the drug mephedrone.

These events remind us that the decisions made in the next two years will resonate not only through the scientific community as it stands, but will also extend and affect the lives of those that are sitting in classrooms, lecture theatres and libraries across the country and are still perhaps unsure about pursuing a career in science.

For those who are still undecided, the RSB have developed a number of resources for pupils considering a career in biosciences. We are also supporting the STEM Insight programme, to allow for teachers to complete placements in universities or industry to expand on their STEM skillsets and experience. Undoubtedly the resources and support from RSB and across the sector will be more important than ever for those at the beginning of their science career or wishing to expand their acumen further.

With this in mind, in February we also responded to the Science and Technology Select Committee enquiry into closing the STEM gap. The UK requires an additional 104,000 STEM graduates and 56,000 STEM technicians each year to plug this deficit and so far is struggling to do so.

The RSB, along with its Member Organisations including the Biochemical Society, have developed resources for pupils considering a career in biosciences. The Biochemical society is also supporting the STEM Insight programme, to allow for teachers to complete placements in universities or industry to expand on their STEM skillsets and experience.

Along with our degree accreditation programme, our wider registration programmes for technicians and researchers and our new Plant Health Professionals Register, we are working hard to raise the standards of education, offer more opportunities for researchers to develop their STEM skillsets, and recognise the excellence of those already working in biosciences.

Closing the STEM skills gap is an endeavour that is vital for ensuring the longevity of our science and technology sector, and one that RSB and all its Member Organisations will continue to address; it is imperative we ensure our current and future researchers are best placed to sustain and develop our UK science base in the months and years to come.

It was particularly encouraging to be present for the launch of the report by Stephen Metcalfe MP, Chair of the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee, on his recommendations for science priorities for Brexit; a report that succinctly and clearly outlined a number of priorities that should be considered and addressed in the coming months for science and research.

The recommendations, focusing on people, investment, collaborative efforts and trade, mirrored our priorities for ensuring that the members of our UK science base are not confined to what they can do and achieve; we want the UK to remain a global leader in science and we need to remain as open and accessible as possible to retain this standard.

We hope that these recommendations, produced after lengthy discussion and drawn from evidence submitted by members of the science community, will be taken forward and form a foundation for the coming negotiations following the triggering of Article 50.