Introducing the New Chair of the Education, Training and Public Engagement Committee

Dr Helen Watson became Chair of the Biochemical Society’s Education, Training and Public Engagement Committee in January 2019. Here she provides an overview of the work of this Committee and key priorities for the future.

As incoming Chair of the Education, Training and Public Engagement Committee, I am looking forward to continuing the excellent work the Society already does in this area, as well as addressing new opportunities and challenges that lie ahead. Rob Beynon, the outgoing Chair, has led this Committee through a period of change as we shifted our emphasis towards supporting bioscience education from age 15 onwards (as the Royal Society of Biology took over the activities aimed at younger children). Rob oversaw the development of a huge array of fantastic activities (alongside the Education, Training and Policy team at the Society) and I feel privileged to be taking over as Chair of this enthusiastic and energetic Committee.

My previous role at the Society was to help form, and then Chair the Training Theme Panel (TTP), which oversees the training remit of the Society. Since the formation of this panel, we have run many face to face training events as well as setting up a new online training portal which we opened with the very successful ‘R for Biochemists’ course. This course has run several times now and we have several other online courses in the pipeline. I feel that online training is something we should expand, as it makes our programme accessible to many who may not, for various reasons, be able to attend face to face training. We have also engaged with industry through our training activity, recently running a very popular course on drug discovery alongside industrial collaborators. I am looking forward to watching our training programme go from strength to strength under the leadership of the incoming Chair.

Science education and public engagement are things that I have been passionate about throughout my career. I have been involved in outreach and engagement initiatives in Southampton, Sussex, Manchester, Uganda, Exeter and now Plymouth, where I lead on widening participation activity in my department. The educational and political landscape in the UK has changed significantly over the last few decades and as a learned society we have a responsibility to continue to engage not only those in science education but the public too.

We now live in a world where information is abundant. Anyone with internet access can find reliable (and unreliable) information on anything in under a second. This change should be reflected in what we do, making sure that we help people to understand and question things, rather than simply convey knowledge. There has been much talk in recent years about whether anyone wants or needs ‘experts’. Should, or indeed can, the public trust everything that scientists say? I think that learned societies like ours have a moral obligation to inform, enthuse and promote debate. Through various events, debates and online media we can inform people about how scientific research works and that uncertainty is an acceptable and integral part of scientific enquiry. Whether we are training scientists with decades of experience in their field, or talking to children and their parents at a science festival, we need to instil a sense of curiosity and encourage questioning. By working with academia, industry, school teachers and others outside of the scientific sphere, we can take an informed and balanced approach.

We have many interesting projects in progress at the moment. In a recent project, we have looked beyond working with only scientists, by piloting an exciting science and art collaboration with Central Saint Martins. We have continued to regularly publish chapters of our ‘Understanding Biochemistry’ series in the journal ‘Essays in Biochemistry’. These are aimed at A-level students thinking about studying biochemistry, and are also used by teachers and undergraduates. Some of these articles have been downloaded tens of thousands of times and continue to be popular. We are planning more training events for HE educators based on the success of previous events, and our freely available careers resources are continuing to be updated and shared.

I am looking forward to working with the Committee and Society staff to build on our careers activity, working with other learned societies to inform future scientists and their teachers about established and emerging career paths in bioscience. I also intend to continue to work closely with TTP to provide life-long learning opportunities to our members and others, proactively targeting groups we have not reached before, including technicians. I am excited about chairing this committee for the next few years, facing up to the challenges emerging in science education and using the voices of our members to the greatest effect possible.

To find out more about our education, training and public engagement activities, please visit the website (www.biochemistry.org/education and www.biochemistry.org/events).