

How the Biochemical Society and Portland Press are engaging with and supporting early career researchers

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The Biochemical Society held its Strategy Retreat at the end of November 2020 and, at this meeting, our Council of Trustees considered the key opportunities and challenges in the year ahead (find more on the outcomes here). Following our earlier commitments to represent all members of the community regardless of career stage, it was noted that EDI (equality, diversity and inclusivity) needs to be considered as part of everything we do and we are committed to improving 'in-house' diversity across our committees, in parallel to developing our EDI strategy further. Part of this commitment includes representation of those at all career stages, from students through early career researchers (ECRs) to established scientists.

Portland Press is the wholly owned publisher for the Biochemical Society, publishing seven journals as well as *The Biochemist*, the freely available magazine which acts as the voice of the Society to the community. Roughly a third of the Society's members are early career molecular bioscientists. We are delighted to be able to share with you some of our recent activities aimed at supporting and working with ECRs.

Biochemical Society's Early Career Advisory Panel

The Early Career Advisory Panel (ECAP) was established in November 2018 and is currently composed of 10 ECR representatives from industry and academia, and myself (Dominika) as the Chair. ECAP discusses issues related to ECRs, represents the views of ECRs to the Biochemical Society (with the Chair of the Panel also being a Trustee of the Society) and offers advice so that the concerns and needs of this section of the community can feed into the Society's strategic objectives. The ECAP aims to shape the way the Society achieves its mission by engaging with ECRs in all areas of the Society's mandate, such as communication, policy and training.

Portland Press ECR Taskforce

The strategy of the Biochemical Society is set and driven by its Council of Trustees, which is elected by members and has the ultimate responsibility for all aspects of the Society's activities. Responsibility for specific areas of activity and function is delegated to its sub-committees, with publishing activities being the responsibility of Publications Committee and Portland Press Board. During 2020, both Publications Committee and Portland Press Board thought that it would be valuable to hear the views of ECRs on policy and publishing items that were being discussed within the publishing landscape – by the end of the year, the ECR Taskforce was launched to enable us to do just that.

The aim of the taskforce is to discuss and advise on potential publishing activities and policies, specifically in the context of how these might impact ECRs, and to give input into how the scholarly publishing ecosystem could/should develop (over the next 10 years) to support ECRs in their career progression.

The taskforce of approximately 30 ECRs working in the biosciences met virtually in early February 2021 to discuss the topic of peer review and preprints. Discussions included the impact of a journal's peer review model when choosing to submit to or review for that journal; the importance of recognition for peer review work; and whether preprints are a 'friend or foe' of journal publishing. There was excellent discussion among the groups, with forms of reviewer recognition being particularly important to the group. Key points have been fed back to the Society's Publications Committee and Portland Press Board to feed into their own discussions on peer review and preprints.

In May 2021, the taskforce met again, this time to discuss authorship criteria and publication metrics. The taskforce was asked which metrics they considered most important for their own personal development as well as those used to assess a journal, with several factors from time to decision, previous experience, costs and citations all being mentioned. Portland Press will use this feedback to consider the information currently presented to users to ensure that those of most

value are being surfaced. The taskforce were also asked their views on authorship, and while there was consensus that to be a named author one must have 'contributed significantly' to a paper, there was discussion over the various forms that might take and how to standardize them. The taskforce noted that the CRediT system, recently introduced for submissions to the journals published by Portland Press, was a positive step in making author contributions more quantifiable.

ECR Editorial Board Mentorship Scheme

Recognizing that editorial work is something many ECRs are interested in getting more involved in, in 2021 Portland Press launched a pilot Editorial Board Mentorship Scheme aimed at ECRs. The aim of the scheme is to pair up ECRs with existing Associate Editors on our journals and to facilitate a 1:1 mentorship programme which will introduce the ECR to the role and responsibilities involved in academic publishing.

This scheme is not intended to provide training in acting as a reviewer on a paper, but to go deeper – we are aiming to give the ECRs the skills needed to join an editorial board in the future, including:

- Assessing the suitability of a paper for consideration in a journal (i.e., should a paper be sent for peer review?)
- Identifying potential reviewers for specific papers
- Assessing reviewer comments when submitting and making a decision on a paper
- Assessing any potential ethical/policy questions that might arise with a paper

In addition to the more day-to-day aspects of being on an editorial board, the ECR would also be mentored by the Associate Editors in how to act as an ambassador for the journal. This could be:

- Suggesting topics/authors for review articles
- Encouraging peers/colleagues to submit to a journal
- Promoting a journal at conferences/events

Over 70 applications were received to the pilot from 17 countries, from Germany to Malaysia and Cyprus to South Africa. Successful ECRs were matched based on their scientific interests to one of the Associate Editors who agreed to take part in the pilot from the *Biochemical Journal*, *Biochemical Society Transactions* and *Clinical Science*. The scheme officially began on 1 March 2021. Portland Press is currently monitoring the participants in the pilot scheme and are excited to see how it progresses.



Special ECR-focused issue of *Essays in Biochemistry*

Essays in Biochemistry publishes themed issues looking at key topics of interest within the molecular biosciences. The most recent issue, *Biochemistry: One Molecule at a Time*, explores the emerging area of single-molecule biochemistry, which allows researchers to investigate one biological macromolecule at a time.

This issue of *Essays in Biochemistry* was guest-edited by Dominika and is the very first written entirely by ECRs, highlighting the strength, diversity and excellence of the early career single-molecule scientists who are driving this exciting field forward.

The issue includes contributions from Dr Lisanne Spenkelink (post-doc at the University of Wollongong, Australia), Dr Sonja Schmid (post-doc at the Kavli Institute of Nanoscience Delft, The Netherlands), George Cameron (a PhD student at The Francis Crick Institute, UK), Rebecca Andrews (a PhD student at the University of Oxford, UK) and Dr Erik Holmstrom (a junior PI at the University of Kansas, USA).



ECR webinar series

In 2021, the Biochemical Society and Portland Press collaborated to launch our *Biochemistry Focus* webinar programme. As part of this, we included a series of webinars aimed specifically at ECRs. The series has two strands: a research strand covering a topic of interest submitted by Early Career Members of the Society, and includes presentations from four ECRs who share their current work with the audience, and a strand offering career support and guidance. The Society aims to include one ECR-focused webinar a month, alternating between these strands where possible.

The events are available online for free and generally last about an hour in the early afternoon (GMT).

Recently covered scientific topics include 'Novel advances in signalling: next generation approaches' and 'Computational biology and bioinformatics'; all past ECR webinars can be viewed on the Society YouTube channel.

We have an exciting line-up of ECR webinars over the course of 2021, both research- and career-focused, on topics such as 'glycobiology' and 'raising one's professional profile'.

The COVID-19 pandemic: impact on the molecular bioscience research community and beyond

Having conducted two surveys last year to establish the impact of COVID-19 on our community of researchers, the Biochemical Society noted the disproportional effect the pandemic had on ECRs. As with the first survey (which ran in April 2020), a follow-up article in *The Biochemist* encapsulates the insights garnered by our second survey (conducted October 2020), including:

- 46% of ECRs reported experiencing adverse impacts on their mental health;
- ECRs reported being able to complete only 42% of their usual work between April and October 2020;
- 75% of ECRs reported that they had not been able to collect enough new experimental data and were anticipating an impact on their career progression.

The ECAP was instrumental in formulating and implementing a Society-wide action plan, which aims to mitigate the dramatic impact of the pandemic on the junior members of the bioscience community. Our efforts to support the ECR community are focused particularly on tackling the concerns around career progression and funding landscape; please see our latest policy article in *The Biochemist* for further details.

If you are an ECR, our Early Career Membership brings all the benefits of Full Membership at a significantly reduced cost!

Applicants are entitled to Early Career Membership for 10 years from the date of gaining a postgraduate qualification in the life sciences.

Find out more about how you can join the Biochemical Society here <https://biochemistry.org/membership/early-careers/>