

BIOLOGY AND EDUCATION

Everybody is an education expert – at least that’s what many people think: after all we are all ‘customers’ of education systems and processes at some point in our lives. The reality, however, is that education policy and practice is enormously diverse and equally complex, ranging from engaging young primary school children through to vocational and academic qualifications. There are a multitude of acronyms and a confusing array of institutions involved.

The Society of Biology is an active participant in education issues. As well as influencing policy, we also have a key role in helping with interpretation of the jargon that so often surrounds education debates. With that in mind, the Society will be holding a seminar this autumn to help any of our members who are not experts, get under the skin of education policy and how exams are set and assessed, perhaps helping to answer the hotly debated issue as to whether exams really are getting easier.

It is a good time to create momentum around education. Michael Gove, our Minister for Education has already indicated a likely shift to more ‘traditional’ A Levels, with the abolition of AS exams along the way. The exam regulator OFQUAL has rejected the examining boards’ proposals for new specifications for the GCSE examinations and the Qualifications & Curriculum Development Authority (QCDA) is to be abolished. These are significant changes that need to be monitored and influenced.

During the course of this year, the Society has been working with our Member Organisations to create a strong voice for biology, working both independently and with the other sciences, especially through SCORE (Science Community Representing Education). There has been real progress with the proposed new specifications for biology progressing much further than some of the other disciplines. In the past, some have positioned biology as the easy option, especially amongst the sciences. But the evidence shows exactly the opposite. According to a range of independent measures, biology scores as one of the hardest A levels. In terms of relative grading, it is two grades ‘harder’ than some other disciplines. But we need to be careful to ensure biology stays relevant and focused on skills, not just knowledge. Practical training has always been under threat. It is more complicated in biology than many of the other sciences and certainly at university level, becomes extremely expensive. As the new coalition Government starts to review spending cuts across the public sector, the Society will be campaigning hard to ensure biology doesn’t lose out. It would be all too easy for Government and the university sector to move away from hands on practical skills in the laboratory and in the field in favour of the cheaper option of demonstrations or videos. For that reason, practical skills will continue to be a focus of our work at all levels. The Practical Biology website has proved increasingly valuable to biology teachers and we now need to ensure it grows and becomes sustainable.

As well as influencing formal education policy all learned societies must help show that the sciences are exciting as well as contributing significantly to our society and the economy. How often have we heard that it was an inspirational teacher that attracted someone into the study of

biology? In a world of limited resources, we must make sure that teachers continue to be strongly supported with continual professional development available and resources easily accessible to help them make the current curriculum as engaging as possible, providing opportunities for study outside of core material to enrich learning. The Society of Biology will be pushing this independently, and through SCORE, and working closely with other institutions such as the National Science Learning Centre to ensure material is as widely available as possible.

Having succeeded in engaging students in studying biology, there is a further challenge of ensuring they maintain their association with the subject. To do that we need interesting and relevant careers material to help make choices. With this in mind, the Society is pulling together new resources for careers but will aim not to reinvent the wheel. Our Member Organisations have a wealth of material which needs to be drawn together and made available to all biologists, not just those in particular disciplines.

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