

From the President's desk



Experimental biologists throughout the world are wondering what the short and longer term effects of the 'financial crisis' will be on our subject - research, careers and students. In a news and publicity-driven world, there is no doubt that we - as individuals or through representatives - need to stand up for our subject, telling everyone about the importance of experimental biology and how our research is critical to the resolution of so many of the challenges facing the human race and the planet. Fortunately, over the 20 years of my career, it has been increasingly recognised as important to talk about one's field outside specialist conferences, and now these activities are embedded within many organisations and societies such as SEB. Your Society needs to be looking forward to see how best to promote and expand the field of experimental biology. Thanks to the outstanding stewardship of previous Presidents, Treasurers and Investment Officers, the SEB has a secure financial footing and widely diversified range of income our investments in securities and property, from our Journal income, from our membership income, and from our conference revenue. Therefore, while great care is needed with our assets, we can look forward to ways that we can improve dissemination of experimental biology at all levels from publications, through conferences, to

schools, the media and the general public.

One opportunity that the changes which are likely to occur in research and teaching institutions throughout the world is to imagine how we would like to see the subject of experimental biology in the future. There is nothing like a crisis to let people think - and then implement - the unthinkable. Can we improve the ways that research is facilitated and foster the development of big and new ideas? Is the division of 'Institutes' and 'Universities' correct? Are we teaching the right numbers and standards of experimental biology students? Are the school, and then career pathways, working to ensure that people use their talents in the best possible ways? What are we teaching? Are there enough facts? Are there enough skills? Is there enough 'attitude' taught to our undergraduates? Is four years (in most countries, three years in England for example), or rather less than full-time study, the appropriate length for a degree course? Is it right that student achievement is widely seen not by the subject and grade of their degree, but by the name of their University? Or are the employers just wrong in thinking that a top-class degree from an institution with a name starting, for example, with O or C in the UK, or Y or H in the US, is worth more than the same degree classification from an institution renamed as a University 20 years ago? Then there is the question about who does the teaching. Presumably, professional teachers who go to conferences on pedagogy are better at getting something across to an audience than university 'lecturers' whose institution will promote them almost entirely on research performance. Who benefits and who loses by this system, and can it be improved? I discussed our Society income in the first paragraph; one source of revenue that has remained minimal for the SEB is from industry:

although we have a proportion of members from industry, and a few companies are generous in sponsorship of our conferences, it is notable that neither has increased during the 1990s and 2000s. Equally, there is little evidence of any increasing movement of people between research posts in Universities or Institutes, and industry, at least at a senior level. Nevertheless, it is important that such a vision is brought in: a third of our SEB council has industry experience. In another area, one can make an argument that the typical post-doc and PhD order is the wrong way around: many post-docs work on tightly-defined projects, often in larger groups. A PhD project is much more open and exploratory in its nature. Any thoughts about these issues - and how to develop a wider discussion - would be welcomed by me.

Meanwhile, back at the coalface, for many of our members a new term of teaching has started. With my son just starting on his last two years at school, this time next year he will be choosing a University, and for the first time I realise I'm old enough to be the father of many of the new students! Encouraged by many discussions with Dr Alan Cann in my Department, and the success of a new blog-site, AoBBlog.com, for a journal I am associated with, I have moved my teaching with relevant feedback, discussions and comments into online space much more this year. It will be interesting to see how tools including Friendfeed and YouTube will help with encouraging more active learning and whether I can spend more time encouraging thinking and attitudes, rather than learning material which is much better presented in books or on-line. So that is my answer to some of the questions posed above!

Pat Heslop-Harrison
SEB Honorary President



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If you would like to contribute (short notes, letters or a more lengthy scientific interest article) please contact the Bulletin Editor: Sarah Blackford s.blackford@lancaster.ac.uk