

Report on LT&A Issues for the Teaching of Biosciences in Wales, February 2006 **Sue Assinder (LTSN Country Consultant – Wales)**

Two main issues have dominated the Welsh HE sector in recent months.

Reconfiguration and Collaboration

The Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) has recently announced the allocation of significant funding to Welsh universities under the second phase of the Reconfiguration and Collaboration Fund. The University of Wales, Aberystwyth and the University of Wales, Bangor have come together to collaborate across a number of research disciplines where they currently demonstrate excellence and have natural synergies. Research in the biosciences will be a prime beneficiary from these developments. One outcome will be a 'Welsh Centre for Integrative Research in the Rural Environment', which will bring together biologists and agricultural scientists from both institutions to determine how different forms of land use and climate change affect the sustainability and resilience of ecosystems, making particularly use of the 'omics' technologies. A second centre of excellence will concentrate on 'Catchment to Coast Research' and will investigate the physical, chemical, and biological factors that influence riverine, estuarine and coastal environments and their ecosystems. Research topics will include DNA barcoding in biodiversity analysis of aquatic and microbial communities, environmental genomics, and the genetic and physiological basis of responses to environmental change. In a separate initiative, funding is also being provided to establish a Wales Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience, building on existing research excellence at the University of Wales, Bangor, Cardiff University and the University of Wales Swansea. Welsh institutions are keen to stress that these developments are not mergers, but it is clear that the ethos of the HE sector in Wales is changing from one of competition to one of collaboration. Although these are primarily research-focussed developments, the injection of funding and the associated new appointments will present opportunities to develop and deliver innovative teaching programmes in the biosciences that draw on the complementary strengths of the contributing institutions.

Fees and student support

The Higher Education Act 2004 transferred powers over the tuition fee regime and student support functions to the Welsh Assembly Government, putting the Assembly on the same statutory basis as the devolved administrations in Scotland and Northern Ireland. After a prolonged period of uncertainty, recent months have seen clarity over the future fee system in Wales. All full-time undergraduate students studying in Wales in 2006/07 will be charged a tuition fee of £1,200, compared to the variable fees of up to £3000 being introduced in England next year. From 2007/08 variable fees of up to £3,000 are also being introduced in Wales. However, students who normally live in Wales and choose to study in Wales will qualify for a fee grant of up to £1,800. This is available regardless of family income and is paid directly to the university the student is studying at. Students who normally live in Wales but study in England will be charged a fee of up to £3,000 and will not be eligible for the fee grant.

Combined with the well-publicised upsurge in the support of bioscience research in Wales detailed above, this favourable fee regime could have a major effect on the number of Welsh students choosing to study the biosciences at Welsh institutions.