

Centre for Bioscience, the Higher Education Academy
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Six –monthly report, Spring 2005

The Higher Education Act of 2004 makes provision for the introduction of variable student tuition fees. The universities in Northern Ireland (NI) will introduce a new fees regime in Autumn 2006, to be £3000 / year (undergraduate programmes). University funded bursaries to complement those being introduced by government will be offered. It is hoped that these will contribute to on-going efforts to widen access to Higher Education within Northern Ireland.

The recent Review of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) resulting in the Roberts Report, led to revisions to the structure and conduct of future RAEs. The next RAE is scheduled for 2008. As a result of the Roberts Report, changes to the way research is organised have taken place in both NI universities. The University of Ulster (UU) has created several Research Institutes including the Biomedical Sciences Research Institute, to consolidate and enhance research performance. The restructuring at the Queen's University, Belfast (QUB) is also research driven with some schools being merged to give cohesion and opportunity for synergism between disciplines. Some Research Institutes have also been developed at QUB, including the Cancer Centre.

The Lambert Review of University – Industry collaboration highlights the importance of Knowledge Transfer Partnerships to contribute to regional development. Student training in entrepreneurship is increasing in many degree programmes.

The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Institutional Audit involving Discipline Audit Trails for selected disciplines and Themed Audits for various themes across the University took place at QUB before Christmas 2004. These are taking place in April 2005 at UU. Biosciences was not selected for the Disciplinary Audit trail at either QUB or UU, but was / is involved in the Themed Audits.

Developments in research governance indicate that universities need to have a University Ethical Committee for non-Trust based research studies. Such a committee has been formed at UU and the first formal meeting is likely to be held in August / September 2005.

Opportunities to introduce more taught components into PhD programmes are being taken and modules (with and without E learning components) are being developed and introduced.

Training and assessment in teaching and teaching-related issues in Higher Education is given to all new academic staff at UU and at QUB for the award of a Postgraduate Certificate. This enhances the profile of teaching as well as equipping staff and encouraging reflective, research based practice. A pedagogic research group has also been initiated at UU.

Personal Development Plans (PDP) for students have been piloted in both institutions. Bioscience programmes at UU have implemented PDP for first year students via study advisors. QUB plan to implement PDP over the next couple of years, to be in place by the academic year 2006/7.

The need for balance between widening access and good retention rates is an area which requires careful attention. At QUB study skills have been embedded into the curriculum over the last three years. At UU within the Biosciences Programmes, study skills have been revisited this year and further embedded into the curriculum. Attendance monitoring of all Bioscience courses at UU was introduced in September 2004, with a stringent review procedure in place. The introduction of Attendance Monitoring is a likely recommendation of the working group on student support at QUB.

The other area where balance is required is in relation to research versus teaching versus technology transfer. All academic staff from the most junior lecturer to most senior professor contribute to taught programmes. The issue is how much teaching – how much research and how much technology transfer? And then there is also the administration which needs to be done to support all of these activities. Getting appropriately balanced workloads is perhaps one of the greatest challenges in our current academic climate.