

## **Centre for Bioscience, the Higher Education Academy**

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**6-monthly report, October 2004**

### **Report on Learning, Teaching & Assessment Issues for the Teaching of Biosciences in Wales**

#### **Reconfiguration and Collaboration**

The 2002 *Reaching Higher* review committed the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) to pursuing reconfiguration as a means of ensuring a strong, dynamic Higher Education (HE) sector that contributes to the prosperity of Wales. The major outcome from the first phase of funding was the merger between Cardiff University and the University of Wales College of Medicine. The Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) has recently announced a second phase of the Reconfiguration and Collaboration Fund, totalling £8 million in 2004/5. Rather than concentrating on full institutional mergers, funding can this time be used to support proposals for HE institutions to work together in clusters or networks of excellence in teaching, research and third mission activities. The biosciences are widely taught throughout the Welsh HE sector, and this source of funding presents opportunities to develop and deliver novel joint programmes at both undergraduate and postgraduate level that draw on the complementary strengths of contributing institutions.

#### **Quality Assurance**

Institutional review has begun in Wales, essentially following the English model. However, there will be no audit at subject level, so no specific information will emerge from the reviews concerning bioscience provision in Wales. The first review has been of the Federal University of Wales, with the report expected in early 2005.

#### **Fees and student support**

The issue of variable fees is not specific to the biosciences, but is included in this report due to its wide-ranging impact on the student experience across the whole sector in Wales. The Higher Education Act 2004 transferred powers over the tuition fee regime and student support functions to the WAG, putting the Assembly on the same statutory basis as the devolved administrations in Scotland and Northern Ireland. The WAG has made a commitment not to introduce variable fees in Wales for the lifetime of the present Assembly (at least until the academic year 2007/08). The Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning has also given an undertaking that Higher Education Institutions in Wales will not be disadvantaged by the Assembly Government's manifesto commitment with regard to fees. An independent review is underway of student support arrangements in Wales, including the opportunities offered by the transfer of powers for access and participation in HE in Wales and the likely impact on cross-border flows of the introduction of variable fees in England from academic year 2006/7 onward. The study is expected to report in April 2005.

#### **Public engagement activities**

The Biosciences Federation (BSF) was founded in December 2002 in order to create a single authority within the life sciences that decision-makers could consult for opinion and information to assist the formulation of public policy. As part of its remit to support

activities aimed at promoting the biosciences, the BSF will be sponsoring a session in March at the Wrexham Science Festival, held on the campus of the North East Wales Institute for Higher Education. Entitled 'Fundamental Research – What's the point?', the aim is to demonstrate that research into seemingly esoteric areas of the biosciences can give major applied benefits.

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