

# FOCUS ON EMPLOYABILITY AND BIOSCIENCE STUDENTS

**A Discussion Forum on Employability was run by the LTSN Centre for Bioscience over 19-20 May 2003.<sup>1</sup> In the attractive surroundings of the Gomersal Park Hotel, West Yorkshire, a diverse group of invited people came together to share information about and debate issues surrounding employability and bioscience students. Delegates included bioscience teachers, recent graduates and others professionally engaged in skills development, work awareness provision and careers guidance for students in higher education. The world of work view was represented by an experienced recruiter from AstraZeneca and a number of young, employed graduate bioscientists.**

Improving the employability of students is an issue of increasing importance and in recent years has featured in a stream of government reports and initiatives. Employability skills and attributes are included in QAA subject benchmark statements, and the extent to which graduates of a particular institution obtain employment is now a performance indicator. Recently HEFCE has established the Enhancing Student Employability Co-ordination Team (ESECT) "to improve student employability and encourage employment-relevant learning" which will provide resources and guidance to subject communities (<http://www.ltsn.ac.uk/genericcentre/index.asp?id=17641>).

In discussions leading to a definition of employability within a bioscience context, delegates accepted that having employability is not the same as having employment or being employable and that it is best thought of as a process. Essentially it requires a graduate to be equipped for employment *and* to maintain that "equippedness" to manage the twists and turns of a career that is likely to span a range of employers and a variety of work roles. Flexibility and responsiveness to change is essential. One important message for bioscience teachers, coming particularly from the employer delegates, was that in-depth knowledge is essential and should not be put at risk by an over-expanded curriculum. This must be accompanied by the generic skills – e.g. communication and team-working – that enable a bioscientist to work effectively with colleagues both technical and non-technical alike. The definition which emerged is that:

*"Employability is a combination of in-depth subject knowledge, work awareness, subject specific, generic and career management skills, and personal attributes and attitudes, that*

*enable a student to secure suitable employment and perform excellently throughout a career spanning a range of employers and occupations."*

Of the employability resources made available to bioscience teachers by the Subject Centre, two especially merited sessions at the Forum. The first was the **Employability Card Sort** (<http://bio.ltsn.ac.uk/issues/employability/cardsort/>), a visual and entertaining way for students to control and enhance their learning and bring about a successful start to their career. Ideally embedded in the tutorial system it can be customised by tutors for particular subject groups. The second was the **Employability Audit** (<ftp://bio.ltsn.ac.uk/employability/empaudit.rtf>) which can help a bioscience unit to take an objective look at the activities already in place to meet its employability agenda and to focus on areas in need of development, e.g. changing course design and delivery.

The considerable and valuable work on expanding the availability and quality of student work experience being carried out in higher education was strongly reflected in the presentations and discussions. Ways of setting up work schemes and the benefits of them to students, including increased motivation for study, better academic results, and graduate job outcomes were reported.

It was essential, interesting, and at times provoking, to have employer input into the proceedings. The mix of subject knowledge, technical and generic skills, and personal attributes required by all, but especially larger and very selective employers, both at the point of recruiting and then developing graduates, was made evident. The reported weight of competition faced by bioscientists in their

search for technical employment was very sobering. The young graduates emphasised the importance of work-experience as an aid to career decision making.

LTSN Bioscience is expanding its work on employability. The employability web pages (<http://bio.ltsn.ac.uk/issues/employability/>) are constantly being extended with new information and resources. It is hoped to start an employability Special Interest Group (SIG) to facilitate the exchange and dissemination of good practice. If anybody is interested in co-ordinating a SIG on Employability then please contact the Centre ([ltsnbioscience@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:ltsnbioscience@leeds.ac.uk)).

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#### Footnote

<sup>1</sup> a full account of the proceedings can be seen at: <http://bio.ltsn.ac.uk/issues/employability/forum/index.htm>

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