



## **Response to the consultation paper “Shaping the Academy”**

### **Introduction**

The Centre for Bioscience is pleased to respond to the consultation document “Shaping the Academy”. We see this as an important document in creating a strong organisation, building particularly on the work of the Learning and Teaching Support Network over the last five years. We hope that the Academy’s first strategic plan will improve student learning by working with the staff and agencies associated with higher education, and that from this point we can move forward as a robust, well-led and effective organisation.

In compiling this draft response the Centre has publicised the consultation document, inviting contributions via our website. Responses from the bioscience community, the Bioscience Federation Education Committee and the Centre’s Advisory Group were invited and are included. We have responded to the questions posed in the document and included some general comments at the beginning of this response. In order to be concise we have not commented where we agree and hence, the comments below are those which we would wish to be considered with a view to amending principles, aims and objectives.

### **General comments**

The Subject Centres work with staff from many different areas across the education and business sector, but we particularly work with our own subject communities. We would like to see this work recognised with more explicit reference in the document. Similarly we would like to see learning and teaching have a higher profile in the document.

As the Academy takes on new roles and intends to increase its input into other areas of expertise, eg. research and evaluation, leadership and management, we would like to see a programme of increasing capacity through training and supporting existing Academy staff, particularly in Subject Centres. As the Academy offers these services then Subject Centre staff must be trained and developed to support their constituencies.

We are keen that we are not perceived in our new role as “policing” certain aspects of learning and teaching. Just as we have maintained a non-judgemental approach on departmental quality of teaching we are keen that we respond to the community with respect to adopting professional standards. We will “facilitate the development and implementation of a standards framework for professional recognition” where our constituency voices such a wish. Similarly, in establishing “formal agreements with partner bodies such as JISC, Leadership Foundation, QAA and LLUK” the Academy needs to ensure that we are supporting our various communities and not seen to be taking on a more judgemental role.

## Response to questions

*1. Should we be concerned with all aspects of the student experience? If not, which aspects of the student experience should we focus on?*

The bioscience teaching community and the Centre for Bioscience are concerned about all aspects of the student experience. We feel that all of what a student experiences at university contributes to what they learn, how they learn and ultimately forms the person they become on leaving university. However, in order to focus the work of the Subject Centre, and to ensure that the bioscience community understands the aims of the Subject Centre, we feel strongly that the Academy, and specifically the Subject Centres, must reflect the priorities which the bioscience community considers most urgent. Too wide a remit will dilute the work of the Subject Centres and lead to confusion with our communities.

We, therefore, consider it essential to clarify the role of the Subject Centres with regards to “the student experience”.

*2. Should the focus of the Academy's work be “transformative” (leading change in practice to improve the student experience) or should it be “facilitative” (supporting institutional and individuals' efforts to make the student experience better)?*

The work of the Academy should be both transformative and facilitative, we should not have to decide to be one or the other.

*3. Are our proposed strategic objectives relevant to your needs? If not, what are your priorities over the next five years in terms of supporting and improving the student experience?*

Along with those outlined in our strategic plan (attached) we would also include the following:

- to raise the profile of teaching which is not referred to in the document. This had previously appeared in the LTSN overall strategic plan and we are concerned that it now appears to be omitted.
- to look at provision for all mixed ability students. There has been much emphasis on providing services and materials to students who require additional support. We also need to be concerned that within the mixed ability classes that the higher performing students are encouraged and given assistance to achieve their full potential.

*4. What actions might your organisation take to enhance the student experience and develop the professional learning and standing of its staff?*

Those which are outlined in our strategic plan

*5. What are the key services you would expect from the Academy?*

- quality information
- better communications both within and outwith the Academy
- responsiveness and transparency
- timely leadership
- a vision providing timely communication on strategy which Subject Centres are able to include in their operational plan

*6. What should be the key measures of our success?*

When the Academy has established its objectives in consultation with its members and the academic community, these objectives can be measured. Included in these should be:

- students' perceptions of the learning experience
- greater awareness and satisfaction from teaching and learning staff on the generic and subject-specific activities of the Academy
- a higher profile for and increased value associated with teaching – and the rewards associated

*7. How would you like to engage with the Academy and its work?*

We would like the Subject Centres to be fully recognised as a major element of the Academy, understanding that for the majority of our constituents the subject focus of whatever we attempt to do in respect of improving the student experience is the important thing and the only way in which subject-teaching staff will engage with us.

Views were expressed that the Subject Centres are currently the only visible component of the Academy.

*8. Is the range of our activities relevant to your needs as a member of the HE community?*

Feedback from our constituency would indicate that they are satisfied with subject support but less so with generic provision. Ambivalence on the effectiveness of the Generic Centre was expressed. There is concern that the recent focus on expansion at York may result in too great an emphasis on this part of the organisation. The Centre was asked, "What has been done to cut out the dead wood and what lessons have been learned? How have the lessons learned been incorporated into the Academy's plans?"

Helping academics to help students results in support to students. Those who make an impact on student learning are those Subject Centres work with and are not mentioned. How then is the Academy to appeal to academics?

*9. What do you think will be the main constraints on achieving our strategic objectives?*

- gaining the attention of subject constituencies in the run-up to the next RAE
- competition between the demands of newly established CETLs and those of the wider constituency including Scotland and Wales
- no clear career progression in Subject Centres at a time when there is increased recruitment amongst higher education teaching and learning staff
- a lack of clarity in Academy strategy and objectives
- continuation of recent inertia and lack of decision-taking
- the focus on expansion and centralisation in York & disregard for Subject Centres

*10. Do you have any other comments on our purpose, aims and objectives and ways in which we will work?*

There appears to be a change in focus away from rewarding staff involved in teaching and learning. We would like to see this area move up the Academy's list of priorities.