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Universities must invest in quality teaching for the future of UK bioscience

UK universities produce world class graduates. However, the quality of these graduates is under threat if we continue to undervalue the importance of teaching in academic careers, according to a report launched today at The Physiological Society Annual Conference¹. The report, 'Improving the status and valuation of teaching in the careers of UK academics' is published by the Academy of Medical Sciences, The Physiological Society, the Society of Biology and the Heads of University Biosciences. It calls for an urgent change in culture and highlights the challenges and the opportunities for improvement.

Professor Keith Gull, who chaired the joint steering group for this project said "The quality of tomorrow's research, and the knowledge and skills of our future graduates, all depend on the quality of today's teaching. The undervaluation of teaching disadvantages the progression of academics who make teaching a focus of their career."

Despite some progress since the issue was highlighted in a 2010 report² by the AMS much remains to be done to correct the persisting imbalance between the reward and recognition of teaching compared to research in order to establish a culture where research and teaching are integrated and balanced. Changes to the HE funding model have heightened concern for teaching quality, with more institutional income arising from student fees. Concomitant Government reductions in funding for teaching send signals that undermine its status and valuation, while staff performance in the Research Excellence Framework (REF) continues to dominate promotion criteria and tip the academic career away from teaching.

Dr Jeremy Pritchard, Chair of the Society of Biology Education, Training and Policy Committee said: "There is a commonly-perceived hierarchy in Higher Education Institutions that research is more valuable than teaching, and in turn, teaching more valuable than administration. This is counterproductive and must be addressed."

A national workshop in March 2014 and a survey of over 250 academics across bioscience departments and medical schools in UK universities made clear that there is a need for an urgent shift in culture. Areas of particular concern were identified leading to practical suggestions for spreading good practice in:

- Teaching training

- Teaching allocation and parity of esteem between research and teaching
- Valuing teaching expertise in recruitment and promotion in the same way as research

Additional next steps for further progress were identified and include:

- Nurturing the systems that facilitate spreading good practice such as external examining
- Developing clear guidelines for evidencing and evaluating good teaching to capture activity and impact
- Encouraging academics to develop evidence of their achievements and to provide feedback on their peers' activities

Already The Physiological Society and the Society of Biology run award schemes to champion teaching and recognise outstanding teachers in higher education,

Professor Judy Harris, Deputy Chair of The Physiological Society Education and Outreach Committee says: "There is an urgent need for a change in culture and to develop a framework for identifying and measuring good teaching, as already exists for research. Our report makes practical recommendations to help deliver this, such as ways of sharing good practice and encouraging higher education institutions to recognise, reward and invest in good teaching practice".

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Notes for editors:

¹ **Physiology 2014**, Status and valuation of teaching in HE workshop, Monday 30 June, 11.15 - 12.15, The Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre, London

² **The Academy of Medical Sciences 2010 report**, 'Redressing the balance: the status and valuation of teaching in academic careers' is available at <http://bit.ly/1v1UqtH>

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The Physiological Society brings together over 3000 scientists from over 60 countries. Since its foundation in 1876, its Members have made significant contributions to our knowledge of biological systems and the treatment of disease. We organise world-class scientific meetings, offers grants for research and travel, and publish the latest developments in our three journals.

www.physoc.org

The **Society of Biology** is a professional body for bioscientists – providing a single unified voice for biology: advising Government and influencing policy; advancing education and professional development; supporting their members, and engaging and encouraging public interest in the life sciences.

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The **Heads of University Biosciences (HUBS)** is a Special Interest Group of the Society of Biology. Membership comprises over 80 higher education institutions in the UK, represented by biological and life science heads of departments and subject leads. HUBS provides a forum for discussing national issues on the provision of research and teaching in the biosciences, and as a source of informed comment on the consultations that affect HE institutions delivering in the biological and life sciences.

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