

# Expansion of the Society of Biology's Degree Accreditation Programme

August 2011

## Consultation Document

## Summary

The Society of Biology has developed a Degree Accreditation Programme, targeting bioscience disciplines where there is a need for research and development expertise, which is currently in its pilot phase. Pending the success of this pilot, the Accreditation Programme will launch in 2012. This Consultation Document seeks the view of key bioscience stakeholders on the strategy for expanding this Programme.

## About the Society of Biology

The Society of Biology is a single unified voice for biology: advising Government and influencing policy; advancing education and professional development; supporting our members, and engaging and encouraging public interest in the life sciences. The Society represents a diverse membership of over 80,000 - including, students, practising scientists and interested non-professionals - as individuals, or through learned societies and other organisations.

We are committed to promoting biology as a subject of choice to students in schools, colleges and universities. We support and recognise excellence in biology teaching; champion a biology curriculum that challenges students and encourages their passion for biology; support young scientists through higher education, and provide career guidance at all levels. We offer a range of tools to assist our members working in education in their professional development, we respond to education policy consultations, and contribute to curriculum development and course accreditation. Through partnership with other leading science organisations, we aim to increase our influence over the advancement of biology education.

For information about the Society of Biology see [www.societyofbiology.org](http://www.societyofbiology.org)

## The Accreditation Programme

The UK has enjoyed a leading position in life sciences for a number of years. This is reflected in both academic excellence and investment from the private sector. There is, however, a high level of concern from stakeholders that in the current system, undergraduate education in life sciences is unable to provide training for future generations of research scientists at the required standard.

To address this, the Society of Biology has launched a Degree Accreditation Programme, targeting bioscience disciplines where there is a need for research and development expertise. With a strong emphasis on academic rigor and research experience, the Society's Accreditation Programme is specific in its aims:

- to highlight degrees that provide graduates with the skills and experience required to progress to employment in academic or industrial research
- to ensure a pipeline of skilled graduates into areas of particular national need and international importance.

To achieve these aims, the accreditation criteria put a strong emphasis on academic excellence and critically, time spent in an active research environment, focusing on four year undergraduate degrees with substantial research placements either in academic or industrial research groups. This rigorous assessment procedure will recognise outstanding courses across the UK that focus not only on core knowledge but also on experimental and analytical skills. The programme is not about wide recognition of threshold standards, nor does it seek to make judgements on the wide range of excellent degrees delivered in UK higher education.

Accreditation will recognise three facets of a particular programme:

1. A base of knowledge, understanding, skills and excellence as defined by the Society of Biology, which provides the framework and standards for Accreditation
2. Specific knowledge, understanding and skills for routes identified by the intended learning outcomes, and defined in partnership between the Society of Biology, relevant Learned Societies and other partners

3. A sizable research element which provides the opportunity to develop skills in a range of research techniques and experience of planning and undertaking at least one substantial research project.

A range of employers, including industry and academia will benefit from a pool of new graduates who will arrive already possessing the skills for a successful research career and help maintain and improve the UK's position as a premier location to develop the life scientists of the future.

### Pilot of the Accreditation Programme

The Society of Biology's Degree Accreditation Programme has taken rapid and significant steps forward since its inception and we were pleased to launch a pilot of the Accreditation Programme in June 2011. The pilot is a focused beginning for the programme, allowing us to test the process and criteria on a small scale, before launching the Accreditation Programme to all UK institutions.

Biology is a diverse field and we could not hope to accredit the entire breadth in one step. The pilot focuses on two subject areas - biochemistry and *in vivo* sciences – areas where numerous reports document graduate skills gaps<sup>1,2,3</sup>.

The Society received a great deal of interest in taking part in the pilot and we have selected the participants to ensure that a variety of degree models and institutions are involved in order to thoroughly test the process. On-going evaluation will ensure that the experience gained from the pilot will be fed into the final Programme before its launch in 2012.

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<sup>1</sup> Skills Needs For Biomedical Research; Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry (2008)  
<http://www.abpi.org.uk/publications/pdfs/2008-10STEMSkillsReviewReportFINALamended2.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Life Sciences Blueprint; Office for Life Sciences (2009)  
<http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/corporate/docs/life-sciences-blueprint.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Life Sciences 2010: Delivering the Blueprint; Office for Life Sciences (2010)  
<http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/corporate/docs/life-sciences-2010-delivering-the-blueprint>

## Consultation Background - Expansion of the Accreditation Programme

Pending a successful outcome from the pilot, the Society will launch the Accreditation Programme in 2012, opening the programme to all UK higher education institutions. In-built flexibility has ensured that the Accreditation Programme remains inclusive and applicable across the range of the biosciences, we will also increase the subjects covered.

Over the next couple of years we will be expanding the Accreditation Programme into additional bioscience disciplines. We are currently developing our strategy for this expansion and an early step in this second phase of the Programme is the launch of this consultation document. We are seeking the views of stakeholders across the breadth of the biosciences on priorities for the first stage of our expansion into additional disciplines.

**Based on the evidence gathered in this consultation, a shortlist of potential areas for expansion will be drawn up and a stakeholder event will be held on October 17<sup>th</sup> at the Society of Biology's Head Office to discuss these with the broader biosciences community. All respondents to this Consultation will be invited to take part in this event, and some respondents may be asked to present their views at the meeting.**

## Consultation Questions

### 1. Respondent Information

- What bioscience sector do you work in?
- Please state if you are replying on behalf of an organisation and the type of organisation you represent e.g. Higher Education Institution, professional body, Sector Skills Council, industrial employer etc. or as an individual.

### 2. The Focus of the Accreditation Programme

- In the past the Accreditation Programme has focused on research skills, following many reports highlighting graduate skills gaps. Do you think this should continue to be the main focus of the programme? Please explain your answer citing evidence where possible.

- If research skills remain the focus, which biological discipline(s) do you feel should be of immediate priority for expansion of the Accreditation Programme and why? Please submit references for any reports and evidence to support your suggestion.
  - Beyond graduate research skills, what drivers are there in your field for Degree Accreditation? Do you consider that an Accreditation Programme of the nature we describe can address these? If not, please explain your answer
3. Discipline specific expertise
- If your suggested discipline(s) was shortlisted for the next stage of the Accreditation Programme, would you be willing to give a brief presentation on this topic at the Consultation Event on the 17<sup>th</sup> October?
  - If your suggested discipline was selected for the expansion on the Accreditation Programme, would you be interested in playing an active role in the development of discipline specific criteria and/or acting as an assessor in the future?

**Please submit responses to this consultation to Dr Eva Sharpe, HE Policy Officer at the Society of Biology by September 7th. Responses can be sent to**

**[evasharpe@societyofbiology.org](mailto:evasharpe@societyofbiology.org)**

Thank you for taking part in this consultation. The Accreditation Working Group will ensure that your views are taken into account when considering the development of the Programme.

The Society of Biology operates a mailing list for updates on the Accreditation Programme; if you would like to receive these updates please contact Dr Eva Sharpe at the above address.