

# bioFocus

**Mark Downs** talks teaching in higher education



[www.societyofbiology.org](http://www.societyofbiology.org)

Teaching is almost always associated with schools and the education of 5–16 year olds. It is a skilled profession with dedicated training lasting up to four years with life-long learning requirements as the norm. Why then do we still fail to fully train, support and recognize more of those who teach beyond the 16 year barrier, especially in higher education (HE)? For example, being an excellent research scientist may well inform university teaching and help create a dynamic environment but it still doesn't guarantee a great learning experience for the student. Teaching well and inspiring students, matters at all levels of education, in all types of institutions, and certainly not just schools.

To be fair, many universities are placing far greater emphasis on teaching skills and training support for lecturers is growing. But there is still a long way to go, especially if research-led university funding continues to be allocated without full recognition of the teaching a researcher can offer. The good news is that there are many ways in which the bioscience sector can help support the university and further education teaching. The Society of Biology has been working hard to provide more support, stimulate debate and inform policy, greatly aided by HUBS (Heads of University Biosciences), which became a special interest group of the Society in 2011.

HUBS is open to heads of departments and subject leads or nominees, and aims to represent the particular challenge of managing biological and life science departments and units in UK HE. The group acts as a forum for discussing national issues on the provision of research and teaching in the biological sciences, and as a source of informed comment on the consultations of the day which affect HE institutions in their delivery of life science teaching and research. The most recent HUBS conference, held in November focused on HE and research policy. The meeting covered current topics in HE including the Research Excellence Framework, research funding, and open access to publicly funded research and it traditionally splits its two annual meetings between teaching and research. If you are involved in HE life science teaching and your university is not involved do think about getting involved and visit: [www.societyofbiology.org/aboutus/special-interest-groups/hubs](http://www.societyofbiology.org/aboutus/special-interest-groups/hubs).

To better recognize the value of HE teaching the Society now runs the Higher Education Bioscience Teacher of the Year Award originally established by the HE Academy. By identifying the UK's leading bioscience teachers we provide an annual opportunity for bioscience academics to receive national recognition for their outstanding learning and teaching

practices. The criteria look for evidence of the candidates design and development of teaching approaches, undertaking scholarly and professional developmental activities to enhance student learning, and influencing bioscience student learning beyond their own department and institution. It is also an opportunity to highlight and share best practice through the creation of teaching case studies.

The 2012 award winner, Dr Neil Morris presented his case study on *'Using technology to enhance the quality of the student experience'* at the HUBS spring learning and teaching focused meeting, as well as writing a guest blog post on *'Tablets, podcasts and text messaging in education.'* The 2013 shortlist has just been announced.

What HE teachers often lack, however, is not just recognition but resources to support them. The Society is trying to help with this and last summer received funding from the Higher Education Academy<sup>[1]</sup> and JISC<sup>[2]</sup> through their Open Education Resources (OER) Programme to identify, collect and promote UK OER to the bioscience community. We worked closely with HUBS throughout this project and recently launched a new HE teaching website at <http://heteaching.societyofbiology.org> to signpost these resources. We aimed to reduce the time spent by individuals searching the web, ensure better access to quality teaching resources, and help to introduce and encourage those who are new to OER in the bioscience community to use these resources. The website focuses on resources that support practical biology in HE and features lab and field work protocols, videos and animation, multimedia alternatives to wet labs and health and safety information.

Setting up this new website has been the start of this project for us, and we look forward to working with you all on this in the future. We will be adding new resources as they are released to keep the website up to date. If you are creating resources, or know of a great resource that we have missed, then please let us know via the 'submit resources' section of the site.

The Society has also been developing new training courses to support our membership, including a Workshop on Learning and Teaching in Higher Education. The course covers the role of research and experience in learning and teaching in the biosciences, session planning and preparation for effective learning, constructive alignment of outcomes and assessment, and opportunities to develop independent learners. All members of the Society's member organizations receive a 50% discount on these courses which we hope to repeat during 2013 to match demand. HUBS have more planned over the next year including producing a position statement on the value of teaching in HE, launching a platform for universities to advertise their lab space for other organizations to use for practical work, and releasing a database of external examiners.

Hopefully, together with the supportive work of other learned societies, HEIs themselves and many other interested parties, HE teaching will increasingly be better supported and valued.

■ <sup>[1]</sup><http://www.heacademy.ac.uk> ■ <sup>[2]</sup><http://www.jisc.ac.uk>



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