

SUMMARY OF THE BBSRC BIOSCIENCE SKILLS AND CAREERS PANEL (BSC) MEETING ON 17 JANUARY 2011

Quota DTG Scheme Evaluation

The Panel discussed the report from a specialist Review Panel that had been convened to provide an independent evaluation of the BBSRC Quota Doctoral Training Grant competition. The Review Panel was chaired by Professor Robert Freeman, University of Warwick, who attending the BSC meeting to present the Panel's findings.

The objectives of the evaluation were to:

- assess the quality and breadth of the doctoral training provided;
- comment on the outcomes and achievements of the doctoral training and research
- examine how departments are using the flexibility of Quota DTG funding, and identify the advantages and disadvantages of devolving funding decisions to departments;
- comment on the balance and coverage of the studentship portfolio;
- comment of the extent to which departments are using Quota DTG funding to maximum strategic effect, particularly in the context of departments' local strategic objectives, BBSRC's strategic priorities, and local and national priorities for research training;
- comment on the application and administrative processes, including the effectiveness of using a competition as the method of Quota DTG allocation; and,
- identify ways to build on successes and identified gaps and issues.

The Panel's analysis was based on questionnaire responses from Quota DTG grant holders, applicants, postgraduate student supervisors, and postgraduate students.

In summary, the Evaluation is very positive about the quality of training which BBSRC is supporting through the Quota mechanism. Moreover, the use of a competition approach to award Quota DTG funding has driven notable improvements to doctoral training programmes. There are some clear recommendations which will inform the revision of the scheme for the next round. The full Evaluation will be available on the BBSRC website in due course.

Revising BBSRC's Quota DTG Competition 2011

As a major item the Panel was invited to discuss in confidence emerging ideas for a revised scheme based on recommendations from BBSRC's Strategic Plan, BSC's Training Review in July 2010 and the Evaluation of the Quota DTG scheme.

In discussion at the meeting the Panel considered and provided views on a number of issues including:

- the rationale for block awards over targeted Training Grant competitions and the benefits of institutional and multi-institutional bids;
- strategic alignment i.e. how BBSRC can best achieve the right balance between training in world-class fundamental bioscience and training aligned with its strategic priority areas;
- using an algorithmic approach to allocations within the competition;
- the competition approach, assessment criteria and metrics;
- supporting and promoting interdisciplinary training and industrial engagement;
- BBSRC post-award engagement and monitoring; and,
- the length of awards.

In addition, the Panel discussed a number of related topics identified in BSC's Training Review in July 2010 including:

- possibly increasing the current level of the Research Training Support Grant (RTSG) for BBSRC awards;
- piloting a Professional Internships for PhD Students (PIPS) scheme, with the intention of potentially all PhD students having an internship in a different employment sector and moving the 25% CASE requirement out of the Quota DTG scheme;
- using the Quota DTG scheme to protect training investment in major research centres, and fostering multi-centre proposals from departments / institutions with lower levels of BBSRC funding; and,
- maintaining the position of not funding students on grants, but requiring greater alignment between Quota DTG funding and BBSRC funded research.

The intention is to launch the revised competition in late March 2011. Full details will be available on the BBSRC website in due course.

Society of Biology Degree Accreditation Project

Dr Mark Downs (CEO of the Society of Biology) and Niamh Johnston (HE Policy Officer, Society of Biology) attended the Panel meeting to present progress with the Society of Biology's degree accreditation pilot including the Launch and Consultation meeting held on 13 October 2010. Full details can be found at:

<http://www.societyofbiology.org/education/hei/accreditation/accreditationlaunch>.

Recent Reviews

The Panel looked at a number of recent BBSRC reviews:

- Bioenergy and Industrial Biotechnology: Skills Issues
- One Biology One Health
- Research Experience Placements – Mid Point Review

Bioscience Skills and Careers Panel Workplan 2011

In discussion the following areas and issues were identified by the Panel as priorities for the 2011 BSC Workplan:

Strategically Important and Vulnerable Capabilities

- Food Security: Advanced Training Partnerships in Agri-food
- Skills for Bioenergy and Industrial Biotechnology
- Mathematics and Systems Biology Skills for Biologists
- Computational Biology and Big Data Skills
- Next Generation Sequencing (NGS)
- Skills for Systematics and Taxonomy

Broader Skills and Careers Issues

- Revised Quota DTG Scheme and BBSRC strategy for engagement with award holders;
- Interchange Awards: Promoting researcher development and people exchange through partnerships;
- Culture change in the employment of postdoctoral researchers; and,
- Strengthening the career structure for technical staff.