Opportunities for early-career researchers to engage with science policy through the Biochemical Society

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Science policy can be broadly defined as a two-way dialogue between science-related sectors and government. It involves the exchange of scientific findings and opinions with policy makers to inform the decision-making process, as well as the scrutinization of legislation around science-related topics to ensure it is based on sound evidence. Science policy covers a variety of issues, including research, education, funding, ethics, public health and equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI).

Whilst individual scientists can engage directly with policy makers, the routes to do so, such as writing to their Member of Parliament (MP) or submitting evidence to a Parliamentary Select Committee, can be daunting. Unsurprisingly, it is established scientists, such as senior academics and industry leaders, who are most likely to communicate their research findings and opinions in this way. However, policy decisions have the greatest impact on and often long-term consequences for early-career researchers (ECRs), e.g., Britain's exit from the European Union. By engaging with policy, ECRs have the opportunity to make their voices heard and elicit positive change to help build a more forward-thinking and inclusive science sector in the UK. So, how can ECRs engage with policy in a more accessible and convenient way? Science policy is a core objective of most learned societies, so joining one of these organizations and getting involved with their policy activities is an excellent way to start.

The Biochemical Society's policy work focuses on identifying issues that are relevant to the molecular biosciences and channelling the opinions of its membership to the appropriate policy makers. All Society members are invited to respond to issues of national or global significance, such as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on scientific research. Members who wish to contribute further can join the Policy Network, whose participants are regularly invited to respond to issues arising from government consultations and enquiries. For example, recent calls for evidence have included antimicrobial resistance, commercial genomics and aging. Since these calls are often highly specialized, the number of Policy Network members with relevant expertise can be relatively low, so it is common for all high-quality feedback to be incorporated into the Society's official response. Therefore, membership of the Policy Network affords ECRs the opportunity to make a meaningful contribution to the Society's policy position and to have their opinions and experiences shared with government policy makers.

The Biochemical Society's policy activities are informed by its Policy Advisory Panel, which is chaired by the Honorary Policy Officer and comprises an ECR, an industry representative and members from each of the devolved nations. The panel has a wide range of duties, which include reviewing the Society's Position Statements on a variety of topics, such as animal research and open scholarship; interpreting results from the Society's policy-related surveys, e.g., two recent questionnaires[1, 2] that revealed the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on molecular bioscientists; approving the policy-related organizations and events with which the Society partners, e.g., the Royal Society of Biology's Policy Lates series; and supporting the Society's EDI activities, such as the recent move to establish a dedicated EDI Advisory Panel. Policy Advisory Panel members serve a 3-year term and often sit on another panel or committee concurrently, which ensures that issues arising from the Society's other activities can be incorporated into its policy work. Election to the panel is through a self-nomination application process that is open to all Biochemical Society members; positions are advertised via the 'Members' News' bulletin as they become available. Importantly, at least one position on

the panel is reserved for an ECR, which means that the Society's early-career members are always represented. Application to join the Policy Advisory Panel is the ideal next step for ECRs who have some relevant experience, e.g., being an active member of the Policy Network.

The motivation for ECRs to engage with policy need not be entirely altruistic. For those intending to pursue an independent research career, displaying leadership potential can be a key factor in the success of funding applications. Participating in science policy enables ECRs to provide tangible evidence that they are actively communicating their research outputs and opinions with government policy makers, which is an important discriminator of scientific leadership.

For the past 3 years, I have been a member of the Policy Advisory Panel. This has been a fantastic learning experience that has greatly improved my understanding of UK science policy. It has also given me valuable insight into how policy issues impact the molecular biosciences and how different groups within our community are often disproportionately affected by political decisions. In 2019, I had the opportunity to represent the Society at a Parliamentary Links Day, which was hosted at the Houses of Parliament. This was an excellent experience that enabled me to better understand science policy from the perspective of MPs and policy makers. I have also had the opportunity to review applications for the Diversity in Science Grants scheme, which is now in its 11th year. I have been deeply impressed by the quality of the applicants and their dedication to championing equality, diversity and inclusion across the molecular biosciences.

I strongly encourage all ECRs to engage with science policy. The Biochemical Society offers excellent opportunities and a supportive environment in which to do so, and positively promotes the participation of ECRs at every stage of the process.

References

1 Gruszka D. Understanding the impact of COVID-19 on early career molecular bioscientists. The Biochemist 2020;42:74–5.

2 Ferreira P, Gruszka D, Mercer D. The COVID-19 pandemic: impact on the molecular bioscience research community and beyond. The Biochemist 2021;43:66–8.

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