

Peter McCallion  
Committee for Education  
Room 428  
Parliament Buildings  
Ballymiscaw  
Stormont  
Belfast  
BT4 3XX

XX June 2020

**Royal Society of Biology views on the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on bioscience education in Northern Ireland**

Dear Mr McCallion,

I am writing to the Committee for Education on behalf of the Royal Society of Biology. During this period of disruption due to COVID-19 we have been carefully considering emerging education policy issues, response of UK governments to the pandemic, and establishing policy positions on support needed in 2020/21 and beyond.

We are engaging with your counterparts in the other UK nations on matters that particularly affect the sciences due to school closures, remote learning, and the impact on teachers and students in the sciences. Below I have set out some of our most pressing concerns and recommendations, along with an offer to engage further with the Committee for Education and Department of Education.

The Royal Society of Biology is concerned that the support for primary and secondary students has been very varied, and the impact this may have on progression in the sciences in the short and long term. In primary, we suggest that school leaders and science coordinators are encouraged to protect existing time allocated to teaching the sciences in 2020/21. In secondary, we are particularly concerned for those due to sit exams next year and encourage the Assembly to take prompt action to reassure students and teachers about 2020/21. We welcome the early decisions of the Minister of Education and CCEA to ensure that students sitting exams this year will not be disadvantaged, and the confidence placed in teachers to provide centre assessed grades in these unusual circumstances.

As students return to primary and secondary schools, it is clear that practical activities will be impacted by social distancing restrictions, available equipment and PPE, and preparation and laboratory space limitations. Engaging with practical activities and developing laboratory skills are vital parts of our discipline, but should only be reintroduced into the classroom when it is safe for teachers and pupils to work in close proximity. The Royal Society of Biology hopes that some practical science can be reintroduced via Biology fieldwork outdoors earlier than laboratory work. For example, in school grounds, playing fields, a local park, where the risks of infection are substantially lower and social distancing may be easier to achieve.

The Royal Society of Biology is also aware that Initial Teacher Training has been impacted this year, with PGCE students missing a large portion of their second placement. This placement normally provides an opportunity for trainees to further develop their practical skills, and subject specific pedagogy, including for example, teaching laboratory skills and behaviour management in practical lessons.

The Royal Society of Biology would be happy engage further with the Department of Education or CCEA on these matters, and is making the following recommendations across the UK nations:

- Primary and secondary schools should be supported to provide alternative activities that allow students to experience practical skills, and that a return to full practical activity or outdoor field work is phased in as soon as it is safe to do so, including following new guidance from CLEAPSS.
- A framework or guidance for remedial programmes and qualifications in 2020/21 should be developed by the Assembly in consultation with awarding bodies and subject organisations. Including urgent commitment to either:
  - a. Reduce examinable content to be assessed in summer 2021 exams, with recommendations to awarding bodies developed with support from subject organisations.
  - b. Award of calculated grade awards in place of summer 2021 exams, recognising that students have missed a significant portion of teaching time in the first year of their qualification studies.
- Commitment to an equality impact analysis of calculated grade awards, progression and attainment data for cohorts affected by the disruptions this year and as they progress.
- Development of Government guidance for Universities regarding learning and teaching in a laboratory in 2020/21
- Additional support for NQTs in 2020/21, including consideration of a reduced 70% timetable for NQTs, ensuring sympathetic timetabling to reduce planning workload and increase confidence, and securing funds to enable schools to provide this increased support in 2020/21.

I hope the Committee is able to find time to consider these concerns and recommendations.

Yours sincerely,

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