

THE UNIVERSITY *of York*

DEPARTMENTS OF BIOLOGY AND CHEMISTRY

Biology – Chemistry Planning Group Minutes of Meeting held on 16th August 2013

Present: Debbie Smith (DFS-Chair), Richard Taylor (RJKT), Christoph Baumann (CB), Keith Wilson (KSW), Alison Parkin (AP), Tony Wilkinson (AJW), Jennifer Potts (JP), Rod Hubbard (REHu), John Pillmoor (JBP)
In attendance: Belinda Wade (BJW)
Apologies: Gavin Thomas (GHT), Neil Bruce (NCB)

Action

13/13 Minutes of the last meeting: 29th April 2013

The minutes were agreed.

13/14 Matters arising:

i) From minute 13/10(iii) Biochemistry teaching

AJW said this was easily resolved and that Michael Plevin would be taking over some of the lectures.

ii) From minute 13/11(a)(i) Biochemistry programme

DFS reported that GHT and Dave Smith had discussed the new Stage 2 Chemistry component and GHT could provide an update at the next BCPG.

GHT

iii) From minute 13/11(a)(ii) PhD funding/TF subsidy

RJKT reported that there had been discussion at Chemistry's Research Committee about including consumable allowances in PhD funding.

13/15 Standing items

(a) Strategic issues

Update on YSBL space discussions

REHu had emailed BCPG members a document summarising discussions to date. The conversion of the top floor of the YSBL K block fully into wet lab space is feasible but means that new office space needs to be found for c.15 staff. A misunderstanding had arisen that this could be provided adjacent on K2 but, after investigation by Dawn Cartwright and DFS into space in Biology, two smaller offices elsewhere had been identified as temporarily available. KSW pointed out that any solution was for the next 5 years and already the number of project students using the current labs was nearing the safety limit. JP said that the idea should not be abandoned at this stage as it was critical to try and resolve the problem for the benefit of YSBL staff and their collaborators in Biology. It would be useful to know the space requirements of those staff that would be displaced. Further discussions should be held to go over the K block plans again and see if a compromise can be reached.

DFS/REHu

RJKT said that the next new build beside Chemistry would comprise a lecture theatre and labs and this space could be tagged for YSBL if necessary. DFS said that discussions about plans for the future new buildings around Biology were progressing, prior to a wider debate.

(b) Research activities

(i) Report on Biology-Chemistry Symposium

JP reported that the joint Symposium had gone very well with about 80 attendees, and thanked Anna O'Connell for all her assistance with the organisation. Talks had been tailored well with the final lecture given by a visiting professor, Lynne Regan from Yale. RJKT said that the feedback in Chemistry was very positive as regards potential collaborations. CB said that if something similar was repeated next summer it could be combined with relevant staff from Physics and, in this context, organised in association with the newly formed Biological Physical Sciences Institute (BPSI) headed by Mark Leake.

(ii) Introducing the Chemical Biology facility

REHu said that this facility had been set up with pump priming from the C2D2 initiative. Two technical positions have been funded, the first to support experimental work and run assays; the second to support computational work. Funding is initially for 18 months and if the initiative proves worthwhile, more will be sought.

(iii) BBSRC call for Multidisciplinary Centres in Synthetic Biology

JP reported (in NCB's absence) on the development of a 'Symbiosis' bid to this BBSRC call, involving Biology, Chemistry, Sociology, the Biorenewables Development Centre and Electronics. It was considered too early to enter the first funding round so this bid will be submitted in the second round next year. Rob Edwards is pulling all the ideas together and pump priming from the University is in place. RJKT said that there was great interest in Chemistry. A sandpit event will be organised in the near future and Julie Wilson (Chem) and Jamie Wood (YCCSA) should be invited. NCB will follow this up.

NCB

(iv) WT equipment bid

Two ideas were proposed for a possible equipment bid to the Wellcome Trust up to a maximum of £1M: (i) for NMR spectroscopy, and (ii) a pipeline for protein expression. The preliminary deadline is December 2nd, with full applications to be submitted by April 7th 2014. The challenge is that the equipment should be used primarily by WT grant holders, and the NMR proposal would require the University to support the infrastructure. This proposal has been discussed with Brian Fulton (Academic Coordinator for Sciences), Jason Lynam and Simon Duckett. DFS said it would need sensitive handling since the WT has already provided significant funding for NMR research at York – and any additional resource would need to be well-justified in this context.

JBP/JP

(c) Teaching

(i) Student Recruitment

All Biology, Biochemistry and Chemistry undergraduate programmes are full and the quality of students is excellent. DFS said that joining the Russell Group, very good NSS scores and league table positions have all contributed to this success. However postgraduate recruitment looks less impressive.

(ii) Plans for MRes in Computational Biology

A constructive meeting of interested parties had been held to discuss the Computational Biology course and useful notes produced. DFS suggested delaying until the next BCPG to allow circulation and further discussion. The next month is critical in determining who can pick up additional teaching for this course in Chemistry or Biology. If Chemistry can pick up extra teaching these changes will require recoding of modules. It was thought that a large chunk of the teaching could be more generic so that students could pick and choose modules. This would also be a more efficient use of staff time. This is a period of transition, with the growth of 4-year PhD programmes and rising PG fees, but the MRes CB is a good interdisciplinary course with a strong reputation.

(d) Infrastructure

TF equipment update

JBP reported that:

- Central University funding was being provided for the purchase of the Microscale Thermophoresis equipment. The purchase will also be 50% funded by Aptamer Solutions Limited, a local company on the Science Park. Hopefully the instrument may also be useful for the Chemical Biology facility outlined above, in providing a rapid means of determining ligand binding. JBP thanked staff from YSBL for their support for the bid.
- Unfortunately the SPR instrument was out of action again and maintenance is proving to be an issue in the context of the level of usage (costing £6K every 6 months).
- Gideon and Marek are now happy with the solution regarding mammalian tissue culture facilities which involved re-establishing K262 as the main YSBL tissue culture room. JBP noted that the construct developed by Jared Cartwright had provided the key breakthrough in obtaining a functional supply of the insulin receptor, especially relevant as the initial origins of the vector had come from the HiTEL project.

13/16

Any Other Business

Wellcome Trust PhD bid – RJKT asked if there had been any feedback on the unsuccessful psychology/neuroscience based PhD programme bid. None was yet available. RJKT suggested resubmission at a future date. REHu said that this would need to be considered in the light of any potential MBiol degree and where future masters programmes would fit in. DFS said that 4/5 year MBiol degrees were on the agenda for discussion at the upcoming Biology Away Day and Chemistry would be kept informed of the outcome of this debate.

Next Meeting: November in Chemistry

Debbie Smith
Richard Taylor
27th August 2013