

IUSS Select Committee: Students and Universities**Response by the Wellcome Trust**

December 2008

1. The Wellcome Trust is the largest charity in the UK. It funds innovative biomedical research, in the UK and internationally, spending over £600 million each year to support the brightest scientists with the best ideas. The Wellcome Trust supports public debate about biomedical research and its impact on health and wellbeing.
2. The majority of the Trust's funding in the UK is provided to universities, through response-mode project and programme grants and career fellowship awards. We therefore welcome this inquiry into 'students and universities'. Our response focuses on the balance between teaching and research, which is of most relevance to the Trust. We make four main points:
 - the need to achieve a balance between teaching and research within universities;
 - the importance of postgraduate research student training, where teaching and research activities combine;
 - the need to ensure financial stability, both for teaching and research; and
 - the role of research assessment activities in driving the quality of the research and university environment.
3. ***Achieving a balance between teaching and research:*** We argue that both teaching and research must be recognised and valued within universities and the wider higher education sector. The two activities should be seen to complement and reinforce each other. In particular, leading scientists often encourage and inspire the next generation of researchers, acting as valuable role models for students.
4. However, teaching and research may be seen to pose conflicting demands on an individual's time. The right balance will vary, and reflect a number of factors, including the nature of research, aptitude and enjoyment in teaching, and other commitments and responsibilities within the institution. Departments and institutions need to be flexible in order to accommodate these variations, and allow researchers to fulfil both their teaching and research potential.
5. We hope that individuals holding Trust Fellowship awards are able to contribute to universities by being good educators as well as good researchers. While we anticipate that those researchers whose excellence has been recognised by the receipt of a prestigious fellowship should be allowed to focus on their research throughout the award, we also recognise that the training of future researchers is integral to the role of a research leader.
6. ***The importance of postgraduate research training:*** teaching and research activities combine together particularly effectively in postgraduate research student training. Here, successful training will depend on carefully designed courses, strong scientific supervisors and supportive mentorship, combined with high quality research environments.
7. An example of an innovative approach to training provision is the Wellcome Trust Four-Year PhD Programme, established in 1994 with the intention of improving the quality of PhD training for basic scientists in the UK. There are now 27 Trust-funded programmes for basic

scientists, and the four-year structure has since been adopted by other funders in the UK as a model for PhD research training.

8. The programmes each have a similar format, integrating teaching and research. The first year of study is used to: provide extra taught courses; develop transferable skills; increase students' technical abilities; give students experience working in different laboratories through rotations; and broaden understanding of specific areas of science. This study equips students to make more informed PhD project and supervisor selections, and to contribute to the development of the research question, and the planning and design of the project. The provision of realistic costs to support the projects carried out by PhD students has also been central to the Trust's support of research training.
9. ***Building on financial stability:*** Ensuring financial sustainability of teaching and learning facilities must form the foundation for maintaining and improving quality. The Trust has welcomed the introduction of Full Economic Costing (fEC) for research activities as a first step in a move towards sustainability. In particular, fECs has given universities a better understanding of the true costs of research. It is now important to begin to develop a similar understanding for teaching, particularly for laboratory-based disciplines.
10. Moving to sustainability will depend on effective partnerships – between universities, the Government, Research Councils and other funders, including charities and industry. In July 2008 the Trust announced four new Interdisciplinary Training Programmes for Clinicians in Translational Medicine and Therapeutics – an example of a successful partnership with academia and industry. The industrial partners, including GlaxoSmithKline and Wyeth, agreed to match £11 million of Wellcome Trust funding. In return, the recipient academic institutions – Imperial College London, the University of Cambridge, Newcastle University and a consortia of Scottish universities – will use the funds to foster a new generation of clinicians trained in research and translational medicine.
11. **The role of research assessment activities:** We have previously expressed concern that the Research Assessment Exercise, in its drive to improve the volume of excellent research, has been seen to devalue teaching. It will be important to ensure that the Research Excellence Framework (REF) avoids such perverse incentives.
12. We would also encourage the Government and Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) to consider how to promote the quality of the wider research and university environment. Factors such as strength in teaching, support for research career development, dissemination and public engagement activities, and investment in infrastructure, are also important to the broader university mission.
13. We remain concerned that these factors may not be adequately captured by the proposed REF, or indeed by a metrics exercise, although we recognise the difficulties of measuring these factors without significantly increasing the reporting burden. HEFCE may need to consider providing additional incentives to encourage excellence in teaching and training. It would be important to ensure that such incentives genuinely drove quality rather than simply acting as a 'checkbox' approach.