



# comment

## microbiology – a degree of concern?

The last decade has witnessed a steady trend towards merging university departments devoted to individual bioscience disciplines into large multidisciplinary units. The consequent fall in the number of microbiology departments has been mirrored by a decline in the number of 'named' microbiology degrees. Should those of us with a professional interest in nurturing the next generation of microbiologists be worried about the declining visibility of our discipline?

Analysis of the SGM undergraduate microbiology prize scheme suggests that we should not be too concerned. It appears that substantially more microbiology is taught in universities than the number of microbiology degrees might lead us to believe. Every year the SGM makes around 50 awards to second year undergraduates who have excelled in one or more microbiology modules designated by their university. The nomination forms provide both the degree for which the winning student is registered and also the number of other students attending the designated module(s). This year, only 24 of the 49 prizewinners were enrolled in named microbiology degrees and their classmates rarely exceeded 20 in number. However, the remaining prizewinners had followed microbiology modules within a whole host of degrees (including Biomedical Science, Biotechnology, and Biology), sometimes in classes of over 100 students. In other words, although the number of named microbiology degrees may be falling, a large number of university students

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are still being exposed to a significant amount of microbiology.

On the other hand, we should not be complacent that microbiology is alive and well provided we know where to look for it. The key question is whether prospective students will also know where to look. This is particularly important at a time when there is more microbiology being taught in schools than we have seen for many years. Due in no small part to the lobbying efforts of the SGM, the microbiology content has been strengthened both in the new GCSE curricula introduced last year and in the new A levels which will come into effect from 2008. We hope that this will translate into an increased number of students wishing to study microbiology at university. However, will these students find it easy to identify suitable degrees?

The SGM is currently contributing to a review by the Higher Education Academy of the student learning experience in microbiology. One of the most difficult jobs for the panel has been to deduce where and how much microbiology is being taught in universities. A search of the UCAS database with 'microbiology' as a key word gives 123 degrees with the 'C5' microbiology JACS code for 2008, although many of these are variations on a theme at a single institution or microbiology offered in combination with another (sometimes unrelated) subject. It also lists 41 other degrees with a variety of codes, including Biology, Molecular Biology, Cancer Biology and Pharmaceutical Science. The non-C5 degrees appear on this

Microbiology departments may have disappeared from universities, but **Sue Assinder** believes that this does not reflect the amount of microbiology being taught to undergraduate students.

list because they have been designated in the UCAS database as containing microbiology. This designation is left to the discretion of individual universities and there is inconsistency in how it is applied. This leads to a muddled and incomplete picture of the overall amount of microbiology provision in universities and is a source of confusion for prospective students.

The need for trained microbiologists has never been greater and this is true also of the need to actively promote our discipline, even if it is within the context of broader bioscience degrees. With fewer named microbiology degrees on offer, we need to be proactive in helping students to identify non-named degrees that will still give them a significant exposure to the discipline. A simple step is to ensure that a UCAS search will accurately identify degrees with a substantial microbiology content. However, there is more that we should be doing to raise the profile of microbiology, from ensuring that students can get detailed information about microbiology course contents from university prospectuses and websites through to actively evangelizing the discipline in schools and careers fairs. Microbiology has been called the 'science of the invisible'. We must take care that it does not become the 'invisible science'.

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