

Strategic Priorities

Association of Applied Biologists

2019 – 2020

President, Stuart Knight

Fit for the Future

Since its inaugural meeting as the 'Association of Economic Biologists' on 8 November 1904, AAB has sought to actively promote the study and advancement of applied biology, and provide its Members across academia and industry with opportunities to network and share knowledge. My primary goal as President for the next two years is to ensure that the Association's foundations can continue to provide a solid base to support and service the present, and future, needs of the applied biology community.

During her productive two years as President, Christine Watson has overseen some changes within the AAB office. The office team, strengthened by the appointment of an office manager, have implemented a new event management system, created a new website and introduced process improvements to increase operational efficiency. Christine has worked to increase diversity within AAB, and specifically to promote involvement of early career researchers within Council, the specialist groups and at events. Progress has also been made with improving linkages between AAB and other similar organisations, where there is potential for working together. All are essential to the Association's future, and will continue.

However, in order to address the opportunities and challenges posed by the changing scientific, industry and socio-economic landscapes in which AAB is operating, there are three major objectives linked to key areas of AAB's activity where a particular focus is now needed:

- Reinvigorating AAB's specialist groups
- Revitalising AAB's conference activity
- Future-proofing AAB's publications

Reinvigorating AAB's specialist groups

AAB's nine specialist groups provide focal points for the diverse range of interests that exist within its membership. Although all groups have a convenor and committee, who perform a vital role in developing the annual conference and workshop programme, they vary in the way they operate, and some have been more active than others in recent years. Between them the groups encompass a wide range of subjects, but with a few gaps and some areas of common interest.

Therefore, working with the specialist groups and their convenors, and by asking our Members, we will explore possibilities for improving our coverage of Members' current and potential future interests. We will actively seek new committee members, including early career researchers. We will also facilitate the sharing of best practice, and pursue opportunities for collaboration between groups, with a view to more joint events taking place. As well as organising conferences and workshops, the specialist groups have an important part to play in formulating and disseminating policies to promote their area of applied biology. We will discuss these roles, identify new opportunities and examine how best to support the activities of the groups, at a convenors' meeting in early 2019.

Revitalising AAB's Conference Activity

Scientific meetings have been at the heart of AAB since it started, with over 40 members and guests present for the first gathering, held at the University of Birmingham in April 1905. Today, AAB holds conferences and workshops with a variety of formats, spanning science, policy and practice, and that are recognised for their technical strength and the calibre of the people involved. These events are vital to the delivery of AAB's mission to promote applied biology, and an important reason why Members join AAB, as well as providing a source of revenue. We have held some very successful events over the last two years, such as Sustainable Intensification at the end of 2017. However, increasing time and financial pressures, along with a growing number of both commercially-driven activities and project or funder sponsored meetings, mean that it has not always been possible to achieve the targeted attendance, in a few cases leading to cancellations or postponements.

A SWOT analysis undertaken by Council in July 2018 highlighted some areas for improvement around conference planning, marketing and communication, and these are already being addressed. However, there is a need for a more fundamental review of our standard conference model, which whilst undoubtedly still fit-for-purpose for some activities, is less suited to the broader range of requirements from different specialist groups and organisers. This needs to take account of new formats (including use of webinars as virtual events), new partnerships and more flexibility around the type and level of delivery support that is provided to the organisers by the AAB office. We will also look at the potential for greater integration of conference outputs into our journals.

Future-Proofing AAB's Publications

The first issue of the Association's Journal, the 'Annals of Applied Biology', followed 9 years after that first conference, in May 1914, when the first of 4 parts of volume 1 was published. Alongside Annals, now in volume 173, AAB is a partner in the Open Access journals 'Plant Biotechnology Journal' (PBJ), ranked as one of the top ten journals for plant sciences, and 'Food and Energy Security' (FES), which achieved a very encouraging Impact Factor of 3.032 for 2017. Between them they provide high quality, peer-review research and review articles across a broad range of agricultural, food, energy and environmental topics, of interest to the applied biology community. Annals and PBJ contribute substantially to AAB's revenue, and FES is also starting to make a positive net contribution.

However, the continuing transition to 'Open Science', and the expectation from a growing number of research funders that publications will be Open Access (and in particular 'Gold' Open Access) means that, for journals such as Annals that currently aren't Open Access, there are important decisions to be made over the next couple of years. Even for those journals that are already Open Access, like PBJ and FES, the changing publications landscape could still have an impact. Open Access is not the only challenge for Annals, we also need to maintain a healthy copy flow of original articles and a strong identity and position in the face of a growing number of new journals from around the world. We will work closely with the Editor-in-Chief in exploring how best to go forward.

I look forward to working with Christine Foyer as new Vice President, our dedicated Council of Trustees and officeholders, and the ever-supportive AAB office team lead by Carol Millman and Alberto Vitale, in continuing what Christine Watson has started and working towards a great future for our Association.

Stuart Knight
January 2019