

2008 North West Regional Meeting

Held on 21 February in Manchester

The meeting was Chaired by Professor Ray Jones, Member of Council, and the main presentation was provided by Professor Jim Feast, RSC President

Summary of discussion

- It was noted that, when agreeing the roadmap, the RSC had to be seen to be non-partisan. It already had good relationship with Government agencies and held regular meetings at Westminster, which involved other sciences. Discussion papers were produced which aids the debate and the RSC seeks to be proactive, rather than reactive in this area
- The UK has a respected history of chemistry research and many other countries send graduates to the UK to undertake PhD or post doctoral research. The RSC works hard to strengthen the UK base and aid retention of graduates. Recent research undertaken on behalf of the RSC revealed the value of chemistry graduates, both in terms of personal earning and the value to the UK economy. This had been very useful because, a few years ago, chemistry was going through a bad time. The research confirmed that chemistry graduates were highly valued in a multitude of areas
- It was agreed that the majority of members were aware of the complexities of issues facing the world at present. Though the press and media preferred “sound bites” the RSC strived to ensure that accurate facts were presented and to provide a sound basis for news stories
- It was noted that the RSC had a 93% retention rate of members and that this was much better than most similar bodies. An active and successful recruitment campaign was on-going, which demonstrated the RSC’s healthy position. The recently introduced “ChemNet”: for A level students was proving to be successful and encouraging more students to opt for chemistry at undergraduate level.
- The meeting discussed the relevance of the RSC’s qualifications. It was noted that corporate schemes were very successful, such as that used at BNFL and that these schemes were being promoted to industry throughout the UK. Recent changes in the nuclear industry and the need for chemistry graduates to work in decommissioning were being addressed. Currently, around 40 graduates each year were coming through the system but would this be enough? Manchester University has money from BNFL and was already appointing new graduates. The RSC was lobbying in a variety of ways and the CEO was on Radio Four recently talking about the skills gap and the Government was being appraised of the need to take action

- The RSC's press office was praised for its activities and it was felt that the service it provided was excellent. Recent press releases included reference to the Government's failure to meet its promise to create 3000 new science teachers. The "Campaign for Chemistry" was felt to be a highly successful initiative. It was noted that the RSC now saw more clearly that one of its main roles is lobbying on behalf of the chemical sciences
- The problems with non-specialist teachers was discussed and it was agreed that chemistry was portrayed as too difficult and not "sexy" It was noted that the RSC is the UK's largest provider of in service training for teachers. To address the problem of the lack of practical lessons, the RSC had produced a publication "Surely That's Banned" This dispels many of the myths about which chemicals can and cannot be used. It was agreed that practical lessons gives students a buzz and more encouragement to pursue chemistry as a career option. Another problem to be considered is the lack of availability of simple chemicals to support practical lessons
- It was noted that, in the last four years, there had been a 28% increase in chemistry undergraduates. Unfortunately, those opting to take up teaching are not as good as desired. Part of the problem could be the low levels of pay which did not attract the best graduates. It may be that the Government will need to consider enhanced pay for science teachers. It was noted that that graduate chemists had no problems in obtaining employment.
- The lack of recognition of CChem was discussed and it was noted that the RSC was currently considering how best to promote its qualifications. Structure training programmes had been developed and these may be one of the answers. A new scheme for employers had also been launched recently, which provided a range of benefits to the employer if it paid the subscriptions of members and participated in RSC activities
- It was noted that arrangements for joining subject groups was currently being considered in an attempt to encourage more participation. Concerns from groups were being taken on board to ensure that they do not lose out. In recent years, the numbers joining groups had dwindled and this created a reduction of income. The success of groups was continually monitored to ensure they were active. Some were disbanded and new ones introduced when the need was identified
- The value of members as a promotional tool for chemistry was agreed and members noted that they should discuss the value of chemistry to society whenever appropriate. Members should be proud of their science and use their designatory letters more widely

- It was noted that there was a trend for the large multinational companies to relocate from the UK. However, these were being replaced by smaller, more specialised companies. The meeting was informed that, whilst the RSC had now established a successful campaign when confronted with closing university chemistry departments, a similar arrangement couldn't be made for industry. Decisions in industry were made on the basis of commercial and financial considerations and there wasn't much the RSC could do to influence such decisions

The meeting concluded at 8:20