

2008 North East Regional Meeting

Held on 13 March in York

The meeting was Chaired by Dr John Green, Member of Council, and the main presentation was provided by Professor Jim Feast, RSC President

Summary of discussion

Following the main presentation, two further short presentations were made:

Dr Andrew Beeby, Teesside Local Section, gave a presentation entitled "Spectroscopy in a Suitcase". Part of the Chemistry for Our Future initiative, this project was designed to give schools a simple in-house introduction to spectroscopy. The project was funded with a grant of £30K from Chemistry for Our Future, £5K from the RCUK Teacher Training and £5K from Durham County Council. Five universities in the north east were involved and staff were extremely enthusiastic. Ideally, the team would like to extend the reach of the programme to all areas of the Region and Dr Beeby encouraged those present to promote the idea to their respective Sections. It was noted that six kits were available at an estimated cost of £2000 each. Using Powerpoint, and one of the kits, Dr Beeby gave a brief demonstration of the experiments undertaken during the visits and members were invited to speak to him after the meeting if they would like further information. A booking system for the kit would be operated by Durham University and it was hoped to train people in each of the universities throughout the Region for them to take the kits out to local schools. If take up proves to be high, Dr Beeby may seek additional funding to create extra kits.

Dr Trevor Griffiths, Central Yorkshire Local Section, gave an overview of the Section's AGM. It was noted that paperwork at the AGM had been kept to a minimum and that all reports had been conducted electronically using Powerpoint. This allowed a livelier report and included photographs from various meetings/events throughout the previous year. The meeting had been held at University of Bradford for the first time and over 90 members had attended.

During the Open Forum, the following were raised:

- It was noted that, during the closure of the Library and Information Centre, the "Virtual Library" will be a valuable asset.
- Though the RSC was influential within academia and could influence the closure of chemistry departments, it should be noted that industry was increasingly globalised and that decisions were taken on a commercial basis. One of the best ways the RSC can help industry remain in the UK was to ensure a good supply of high quality graduates and to dispel negative perceptions about the science in general. A good example was the perception that chemistry in UK universities is still on a downward trend. On the contrary, admissions to chemistry undergraduate courses had increased year on year over the last 4 years and a 28% increase had taken place. Some courses

which had been closed were now being reintroduced. It was believed that the RSC's "Campaign for Chemistry" had been, in a large part, responsible.

- The "Life Sciences" caravan in the Teesside Section was still being used and attracted sponsorship from industry.
- It was noted that Divisions, Forums, Groups and Sections are eligible to request lists and statistics of their membership and were able to use them to contact their members. It was suggested that, if emailing, they should arrange to do this via the office so that their personal email account was not flagged as spamming.
- Chemistry for Our Future was constantly evaluated. This was done in a variety of ways, including how many children attended events and how many subsequently went on to study chemical sciences. All activities involved feedback forms and those returned were overwhelmingly enthusiastic about the event they had attended. It was noted that ChemNet was also highly successful and, during its first year, had 1800 members. Of those, 450 transferred to Affiliate Membership. Currently, membership of ChemNet stands at around 2400. Another positive result of both initiatives was the increased awareness of the RSC and its activities.
- An in depth discussion took place about the RSC's involvement within primary schools. It was agreed that primary schools had little equipment and few other resources with which to promote chemistry and that RSC assistance would be very much appreciated. The North West Region had made inroads in this area. One of their members is a regular presenter in primary schools and is very popular. The difficulty in targeting primary schools was raised and it was noted that there were approximately 25,000 primary schools in the UK. It was suggested that local science museums/centres could play a large part, with RSC assistance and funding. Southumbria Local Section used to have a caravan which was used to promote chemistry in primary schools but, unfortunately, was now unserviceable. The Section had recently, taken a conscious decision to concentrate on primary and secondary schools.
- The President stated that if members wished to arrange events designed to advance the chemical sciences in any way, they should not be afraid to request RSC funding. Promoting science in junior schools is an extremely worthy quest and should receive RSC support.
- It was felt that society as a whole was now far too risk averse and this had deterred teachers from practical science demonstrations. The RSC publication "Surely that's Banned" had played an important part in dispelling myths about what could and could not be carried out in schools. In previous years, many chemicals had been available from local pharmacies and, sadly, this was no longer the case.
- The meeting noted that scientists believe that they, and their work are not appreciated by the general public. However, surveys indicate that around 70% of the public are supportive of science. This contrasts with the scientists perception that around 30% are supportive.
- It was suggested that the RSC should undertake a serious study into what motivates students into opting to take chemistry. It was noted that

the RSC already had a good understanding of the problems. When entering secondary schools at age 11, students are enthusiastic about science. Between 11 and 13, they lose interest and between 13 and 16, they realise that they need to make a choice of subjects. Students could also be divided into three distinct categories:

- Those who make a decision when they need to
- Those who decide as early as possible
- Social class that led to people having contacts with friends and family with differing careers eg ABC1 – doctors, lawyers, dentists C2D – nurses, teachers etc

It was noted that social class is also a big factor in deciding which courses to choose and this is often down to aspiration within the family.

- It was agreed that the “Not all Chemists Wear White Coats” series of posters was extremely successful in demonstrating the versatility and diversity of employment available to chemists. It was noted that RSC posters were available unfolded, on request.
- It was suggested that the RSC could conduct an experiment with a small number of junior schools. Provide them with funding and equipment and monitor the success. The Analytical Division is supportive of such initiatives and may be able to provide funding.
- The “Huddersfield Experiment” carried out a few years ago, had established good links with junior schools in the Section. However, because of the pressure on teachers, it was up to the Section to maintain contact. It was found that, unless the Section made strenuous efforts to encourage and cajole teachers.
- It was noted that many of the issues faced by the RSC were common to many similar organisations, such as the ACS. Whenever possible, the RSC works closely with all other scientific bodies to achieve common aims and objectives.
- It was felt that it was detrimental that so few scientists teach in schools. Sheffield Local section drew attention to the University of Sheffield’s dedicated lab for schools which was proving extremely popular and was enthusing school students. Sheffield would also be targeting younger students at future “Chemistry at Work” events.

The President concluded the meeting by stating that members are the key to much of the RSC’s success. Dr Green thanked members for attending and hoped that they had found the meeting stimulating and useful.

The meeting concluded at 20:35

David Lindores