

Royal Society of Chemistry Irish Regional Meeting

MINUTES of the Irish Regional Meeting held at 18:30 on Thursday, 19 March 2009 at the Jurys Inn Parnell Street, Parnell Street, Dublin 1.

1.0 Welcome

Bill Byers chaired and welcomed members to the meeting.

2.0 RSC Activities

Dave Garner gave a brief presentation focussing on the new RSC Strategy on a Page, how current activities map to this Strategy and future activities.

3.0 Discussion

Bill Byers invited members to comment on the content of the presentation and related issues including:

3.1 Investment in research and education

- The differences between educational and research funding in Ireland and the UK were discussed. It was stated that in Ireland the level of funding correlates with the number of students, which has led to the introduction of various different degree courses. One member expressed concerns that, as a consequence of this, the qualifications have become somewhat devalued.
- The recruitment and funding of science teachers was discussed. In Ireland, teachers decide at the junior level what science pupils study and this is generally biology. In the UK it is also difficult to recruit physical scientists into teaching. It was highlighted that the Irish Education Authority is currently looking into running its own Chemistry for Non-Specialists scheme.
- One particular problem in Ireland is that the 'points' requirement to study chemistry at university is quite low; therefore people come into the course who may not be capable or may not fully appreciate what the course entails and the dropout rate can be high. A foundation year may be the solution to this as it provides students with the opportunity to see if a chemistry course is right for them.

3.2 MChemA

- A member queried what the RSC is doing to defend the MChemA to the Food Standards Agency.
- RSC staff to follow this up.

3.3 RSC staffing issues

- One member raised concerns over the departure of several members of staff from the RSC and the subsequent difficulties experienced in finding a replacement contact.
- Members should try not to rely on one member of staff for a specific job or as a specific contact. Any member of a particular team should be aware of and involved with the work of their colleagues, so that members have more than one contact available to them.

3.4 RSC funding for events

- It was emphasised that Sections should not be afraid to spend the grant money received from the RSC for events. If additional funding is required Sections can contact the Networks team at any time.

3.5 EPSRC

- The RSC's views on the EPSRC's new "3 strikes and you're out" policy (where repeatedly unsuccessful funding applicants are excluded from submitting proposals for 12 months) were discussed. The RSC is concerned by this policy, which also involves informing the university in question.
- The RSC is also concerned by the EPSRC's decision to stop analytical funding. The forthcoming Olympics is an excellent example of the vital role analytical chemistry plays.

Bill Byers invited members to discuss points that had been raised in advance of the meeting:

3.6 Regional working

- The RSC is trying to better pool resources and knowledge between Interest Groups, Divisions, Forums and Local Sections. For example, representatives from Local Sections, Interest Groups, the Younger Members Network etc... could meet in person or establish contact online to keep each other informed of events in their area and ensure they are all working towards the RSC strategy.

3.7 Science education in schools

- A member queried whether there was evidence to support the perceived slide in educational standards and asked the RSC to clarify whether its' campaign focussed on classroom or examination standards. Given that the number of high grades being attained is increasing, it was asked whether the RSC is saying that these qualifications have little value.
- The RSC believes the problem lies predominantly in examination standards, with the specific concern being the lack of problem solving and numeracy skills. This problem was highlighted in the 5-Decade Challenge. The RSC is not criticising teachers or students. The RSC's campaign focuses on educational standards, such as the "banding" process that enables students to gain high grades for modest marks.
- One member commented that lessons are driven by examination standards these days rather than by the fun of chemistry.
- It was added that the RSC is currently producing a 'Fun with Chemistry' resource pack, which will aid Local Sections in putting on a chemistry demonstration lecture in their area and illustrate the 'fun' side of chemistry to school students.

3.8 Landmark sites

- A member queried whether the RSC works with the National Trust on awarding Landmark sites. The RSC currently does not do this but acknowledged that it was a good idea. The RSC often relies on Local Sections to identify a potential site. Members should contact Pauline Meakins at the RSC to suggest a site in their area where significant chemical research was carried out.

3.9 Feedback on the Downing Street petition

- The Downing Street petition and science in government was discussed. The petition put both the RSC and the issue in the public eye and raised the profile of the situation. It provided links for the RSC with other educational establishments.
- It was agreed that there needs to be a greater understanding of science in government.

3.10 Younger Members Network

- One member requested information about the RSC Younger Members Network. Currently 28 out of 35 Local Sections have a Younger Members Representative. Younger Members Reps organise events locally and had a forum at the end of the General Assembly last year, which was very successful. A Younger Members focus group is also going to be formed for which any suggestions are welcome.
- It was emphasised that the RSC can support Younger Members in activities such as visits as a ChemNet Ambassador. This includes providing freebies such as pens and bugs.
- One member highlighted that young professionals will already be working in specialist areas of chemistry. There is a younger members branch in the Analytical Division and it was suggested that similar networks in other Groups and Divisions be established.
- The RSC is currently developing a social networking platform to support networking between RSC members.
- One member suggested a 2-3 day symposium to which Younger Members from all areas of chemistry would be invited. It could provide an opportunity to present work and network with each other.
- Another suggestion was an award for 'ambassador of the year' or something similar. This is something that the RSC has considered. Awards for long-service are already made to members at the General Assembly and having a 'volunteer of the month' section in the monthly Networks Newsletter is also being considered.

Close and thanks

4.0

Bill Byers thanked all those attending for their contributions. The meeting was closed at 20:30.