

Royal Society of Chemistry South East Regional Meeting

MINUTES of the South East Regional Meeting held at 18:30 on Thursday, 22 January 2009 at Burlington House, Piccadilly, London W1J 0BA.

1.0 Welcome

John Dolman welcomed the members to the meeting. Apologies were received from Richard Pike.

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

John Dolman invited members to comment on the content of the presentation and related issues including:

3.1 What does the RSC need to address that hasn't been done yet?

- Ensure young people remain engaged in chemistry.
- Influence at a government level to help strengthen links between industry and universities. It was noted that bringing together the Education and S&T Directorates was an excellent idea and would help strengthen links between these areas.
- One member suggested the RSC does not celebrate success within the chemical sector widely enough and has a tendency to focus on negative issues.
- Change the perception that "chemicals" is a negative word.

3.2 How will members be engaged with a sharper focus on regional activities?

- There must be recognition of what has already been done at a local and regional level. In addition, staff must recognise the huge efforts made by volunteers to keep things running.
- Dave Garner observed that the regions are the lifeblood of the RSC and the Regional meetings are an excellent opportunity to consult on local and regional activities.
- The RSC is looking at ways to help and support members at a local level. Some thought is being given to the concept of regional collaboration and using this as a better mechanism to run activities. Staff would like to hear members' views on how they can best be supported and, if things were run on a regional level, what members would think.
- Communication is vital as is a mechanism for reporting work undertaken at a regional level.

3.3 Concerns that there is a staff retention problem at the RSC

- Dave Garner commented that the talent we have is attracting commercial publishing organisations. The RSC did lose a number of people in quick succession but this was due to good promotional opportunities for the individuals. Some staff have returned to the RSC and there is no retention issue.

3.4 External collaborations and international relationships

- Is there an opportunity for collaboration with organisations like Kew Gardens to explain the science behind the chemicals used to grow flowers etc?
- There is a possible role for the RSC in SE Asia in validating degrees and qualifications. It was noted that the RSC is exploring this possibility.

3.5 The Chemistry Centre

- Will there be security problems associated with members of the public accessing Burlington House? Suitable precautions will have to be put in place when the Chemistry Centre opens. Burlington House has been opened to the public before and our sister Societies also run public lectures successfully. The RSC will continue to be aware of security implications.
- A range of RSC books should be publicised through the Chemistry Centre.

3.6 Concerns over public statements made by the RSC

- Concerns were raised over the 10 Downing Street Petition for education standards. The RSC must recognise the efforts of teachers and that without them there will not be a fresh intake of students for membership.
- Concerns were raised over the Five Decade Challenge. It was stated that valid educational research can not be undertaken using this approach.
- Concerns were raised over comments made by the RSC regarding Michael Reiss and his statement on creationism. In response, it was stated that creationism and ID is a matter of personal choice. The RSC standard policy line is that it has no place on the science curriculum and nor should we entertain the idea that it should be placed there.
- Staff take on board feedback on all issues and will take this in to account in the future.

3.7 Publishing activities

- Publishing is an important way of funding activities and establishing an international presence. The RSC is good at marketing its books to chemists but not so successful at marketing to non-chemists. People do not understand how the books are priced. In response, Neville Reed commented that publishing will be reviewing and changing the approach to marketing in the next 12 months. Books are priced in accordance with the rest of the market.

John Dolman invited members to discuss points that had been raised in advance of the meeting:

3.8 Improving communication between groups and staff and working together more effectively

- Members stressed how important it is for Local Sections to have better communication with RSC staff. Anything that can be done centrally to support communications circulated by Local Sections should be. Kent Local Section has used central communications to great effect.

3.9 The use of CChem as a means of ensuring competency in the subject area

- There are concerns that employers and individuals do not value CChem as much as they should and that there is an attitude amongst employers that favours PhD students above the CChem qualification. The RSC has been looking hard at this area and how value can be assigned to CChem. It was suggested that a monetary value could be placed on CChem and then offered to the market place – if people value it they would take it. Another suggestion is to link CChem to competence.

- One member suggested that CChem is more use to people in SMEs than in larger companies and that campaigns to promote CChem should be focused at SMEs.
 - One member asked how CChem fits long term with CSci. Another was surprised that the RSC promotes CSci as it dilutes the concept of CChem.
- 3.10 The retention of women in chemistry (in industry and academia)
- One member asked what the RSC is doing to retain women in chemistry. Through the Science and Technology Department the RSC has been looking at many related issues and produced several reports. The biggest issues faced by women are cultural and the RSC is working hard to establish good practice in PhD labs. However, changes take a long time to work through the system.
 - One member asked how women can get back in to chemistry after a career break. It was noted that the RSC runs a very successful Advice and Guidance Service to help with some of the issues faced by women returning to work but that employers could do more to ease this transition. It was suggested that the RSC could provide a tailored route back in to chemistry by offering a certificate to women who have maintained their interest in the subject whilst on a career break.
- 3.11 Update of Benevolent Fund activities in the South East Region
- Noel Grabham, the Regional Volunteer Coordinator for the South East gave a brief update of activities in the Region. Volunteers have played a key part in organising a series of events for older members, distributing Christmas cards, responding to requests from the Ben Fund Committee and promoting the Fund.
 - More Volunteers are always welcome and Noel urged Local Sections to help with the recruitment of new Volunteers.
 - Noel thanked the Officers of Local Sections and Volunteers across the Region for their hard work.
- 3.12 Update of RSC assisted work experience placements
- The mechanism to find work placements for students was questioned. Staff explained that the Education Department had done all it could do and that RSC Reps were used to facilitate work placements. In addition, the RSC has a website that lists available placements.
 - One member suggested that companies should be supplied with resources for taking on work experience students (for example, what is suitable to teach somebody of 16/17, practical help and health and safety resources). It was noted that this should come in packs from the schools.
- 3.13 Charging for rooms at Burlington House
- Members were disturbed to hear that there would be a charge for the use of rooms in Burlington House after the Chemistry Centre was completed. It was confirmed by staff that as of 1st January 2010, there would be a charge but that a mechanism would be put in place for lower income groups to ensure the charge is not to their detriment. For RSC members this is not a money making exercise and there will be a heavily discounted member price – ultimately we are hoping to achieve 90% occupancy of the building.
 - Groups will have the opportunity to take part in pilot events, free of charge before Christmas.
 - The price of catering will also be reviewed.

4.0 Close and thanks

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

Gemma Wood
January 2009