

Professor Alex H Johnstone



Alex was born in 1930 in the city of Edinburgh and was brought up in Leith, the seaport of Edinburgh. He was educated at Leith Academy and was fortunate enough to be taught by excellent teachers. When the time came to go to university, he had a 'problem' because he was qualified to study Medicine, Science, English language, History and Divinity. He chose Science and studied Chemistry, Physics, Maths and Botany, graduating in Chemistry from the University of Edinburgh. He also holds a Doctorate in Chemical Education from the University of Glasgow, a postgraduate Certificate in Education and a Diploma in Biblical Studies. He joined the Chemistry Department at the University of Glasgow, and his first Chair was in Chemistry when he was appointed for his excellent teaching in inorganic chemistry (with a particular interest in bio-inorganic systems) and also for his extensive research in Chemical Education. Later he was appointed to the Chair of Science Education at the same University, but he continued to teach chemistry at all levels till his retirement.

His deep commitment to teaching, supported by his interest in psychology and his chemical expertise, led him to establish the Centre for Science Education within the Faculty of Science at the University of Glasgow. This is a research centre, but not a teacher training centre. Here he has supervised the work of over eighty researchers and has had, as co-supervisors, colleagues from most departments within the Faculty of Science, such as chemistry, physics, biology, maths, geography, statistics and psychology. In this way it has been possible to work on a broad, but co-ordinated front, to tackle the large research questions in Science Education, which are more fully described in the overview paper in this issue of CERP. Each research problem has been designed to be part of a whole research programme and each student has contributed to the solution of large problems. More than two hundred publications have appeared as a result of this work.

The Centre's work was recognised when the Principal of the University appointed Alex to set up a Teaching and Learning Service within the University of Glasgow to help teachers in every Faculty and Department within the university to develop their teaching skills and to offer support for innovation in teaching and learning.

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Recognition for his outstanding work has not been confined to Glasgow or to Scotland. Amongst the honours awarded to him were:

- The Nyholm Medal of the Royal Society of Chemistry
- The Mellor Medal of the Royal Australian Chemical Institute
- The Illuminati Gold Medal of the Italian Chemical Society
- The Brasted Medal of the American Chemical Society
- The Verhagen Titular Chair of the University of Limburg, Belgium
- The FECS Lecture of the Federation of European Chemical Societies
- Presidency of the Education Division of the Royal Society of Chemistry

But Alex is not a one sided person. He has enthusiastic interests and expertise in local history, genealogy and archaeology, the last of these acquired in extra-mural classes in the University of Edinburgh and supported by having a son who is a graduate in that discipline. His interest in language ranges from etymology and the origins of place names in English to a working knowledge of German and French. His knowledge of history, botany and geology allow him to lead walking groups to explore the countryside and the hills around Stirling where he lives, leaving them tired but much better informed than when they had set out. Alex has, regretfully, never learned to play a musical instrument, but he has been passionately interested in choral singing, having been a member of several choirs. He is a lay preacher in the United Free Church of Scotland where he has scope to use his earlier training in Biblical Studies and to follow one of the lines, which he had at the end of secondary school.

Now that he has 'officially retired', he is still involved on the editorial boards of several journals and actively trying, through the Royal Society of Chemistry, to influence the establishment of a chemistry curriculum based upon research in Science Education, which will take account of what is now known about learning, about the nature of chemistry and the interests and enthusiasms of young people. In this way it is hoped to restore chemistry to a place of importance and popularity within our schools and universities.

In all of this business, his wife Martha, who has encouraged, advised, restrained and supported him throughout, has preserved Alex's sanity, productivity and sense of humour. Together they are enjoying grandchildren, travelling and pursuing many interests, which time now permits.