

European Chemistry Thematic Network Plenary Meeting Vienna, 19-21 April 2006

Evaluator's Report

Dr Michael Gagan (Royal Society of Chemistry)

Introduction

The European Chemistry Thematic Network (ECTN) is now a mature organisation, and the pattern for its annual Plenary Meeting is quite well established. It also incorporates the AGM of the European Chemistry Thematic Network Association (ECTNA) of 146 subscribing academic institutions, societies and companies, and the European and transatlantic exchange networks (ECEN and TASSEP). It therefore brings together a large number of committed chemical scientists and educators from across Europe (and further a field) and provides a forum for the development and dissemination of good practice. This year a larger group than ever before, 164 from 26 countries, registered as participants indicating the continuing, and very positive, state of health of these networks. This year sees the completion of the programme of ECTN3 *The new generation of chemists* initiated in 2003, and so this meeting was a time to look back at the Network's progress over the previous three years, and look forward to the potential for a continuation of its work in the years ahead.

It is, however, important to emphasise that most of the work of the Network is carried out away from the Plenary Meeting, and perhaps some of the new participants were not fully aware of this.

Venue and organisation

The Technical University of Vienna was an excellent choice for these meetings, and the organisation, by Prof. Johannes Froelich and his team, was undertaken with great skill and professionalism. Detailed location maps and briefing documents covering all forms of incoming transport, were provided electronically in advance to all participants, ensuring a problem-free arrival at hotels and conference centre. All the hotels but one were within walking distance of the University, making access to the meetings very convenient. Clear directions to and labelling of meeting rooms was provided once at the venue, and both the main lecture theatre and the breakout rooms were well-equipped. Catering arrangements were first rate, for both the standard lunches and the special evening dinners – a Viennese Dinner in a city restaurant, and a Rural Buffet (with music) in Grinzing. It is clear that this event is treated as a serious and prestigious gathering, demanding of the highest standards.

Participation

The development of ECTNA has widened the range of participation as all Association members are invited to send a delegate. It is encouraging too to see that although several founder-members of the Network are still active, others have passed on their interest to younger colleagues. Although a lot of regular participants still attend, it was notable that this year quite a number of younger people joined them, including some who had attended the 2005 residential *Workshop for Newly Appointed Staff* in Malta. These new participants found it stimulating to meet lots of new people, but admitted that they came this time mainly to listen rather than to contribute.

Also this year, some students were invited for the first time. This was a very good idea. They are enthusiastic about some of the Network activities (e.g. the *EChemTest*), and they are not afraid to criticise the things they don't like. They are looking forward to next year when they have been promised an opportunity to contribute more formally to the programme.

It was rather a 'steep learning curve' for these newcomers, and a pre-conference briefing pack, to give them an introduction to the past activities and achievements of the Network would have been appreciated. It is deflating for a newcomer to be told in answer to a comment that the issue had been fully discussed at an earlier meeting! They also need help with the unfamiliar jargon and acronyms in common use. However, it was remarked that this Meeting provided a friendly atmosphere, where mistakes in language were accepted and no-one need feel embarrassed. This encourages people to

participate in discussion, which is to everyone's advantage. It is to be hoped that several of the new participants will become active members who could refresh the Working Groups.

Programme

Although this year's programme did not include a distinguished speaker from government or the European Commission, it did have worthwhile contributions from commercial (ASIIN) and industrial (Corrocoat Ltd) interests. Both gave interesting insights into the outputs expected from the Network from those outside academia, as the Association continues to develop as a significant contributor to the European chemistry scene. The Director of the SME was particularly stimulating. There was also a lecture on Green Chemistry, an important topic of current interest; and an outline of a new course in English language proficiency, designed specifically for chemists.

As an innovation, three younger chemists were invited to give presentations. Although this is an idea well worth pursuing in future, a more specific briefing of the presenters as to the nature of their audience and the handling of their subject should be considered.

The main business of the Network during the year is carried out by the twelve active Working Groups, and the Plenary Meeting offers them a showcase to display their activities and their achievements. This year these have been considerable, with the registration of the *Chemistry Eurobachelor* label for approved courses (with several University departments already enrolled), and the establishment of eight Test Centres for the Internet-mediated *EChemTest*, especially noteworthy. The *Eurobachelor Group* has now turned its attention to the 2nd and 3rd Cycles of the Bologna Process, seeking to set standards for Masters courses, and for PhD students and their supervisors; and the *EChemTest Group* demonstrated a draft of the first 2nd Cycle Test – in synthetic organic chemistry. Among the other Groups, the successful workshop run by the *Group for Newly Appointed Staff*, and the COMENIUS grant sought by the *Industrial Placement (Practice Oriented Chemistry) Group* to continue its work, stand out. The *Biological Chemistry Group* is setting up an *EChemTest* of its own to incorporate into the main test, and the *Chemistry and the Cultural Heritage Group* has planned a summer school, and a Masters degree in Conservation Science. The long-established *Image of Chemistry Group* continues to manage and expand the *ChemInsight* web pages, and urges chemists to be proud of the word 'chemistry'; while the *Teacher/Teaching Evaluation Group* has surveyed feedback procedures in different countries, looking for best practice. The *Multimedia Group* continues to develop its repository of teaching and learning materials, its virtual experiential environment, and grid applications. The Groups concerned with *Developing Independent Learners*, at which an excellent analysis and review was given; *Rare Knowledge in Chemistry*; and *Links with Schools* – now on to *Part V* of its *Examples of Good Practice* – also reported. Audiences for Group meetings ranged between sixty and six, and the meetings generally sustained a level of interest among the participants for the whole of the allocated time. Most discussions resulted in an exchange of suggestions and ideas for the Group members to consider, especially when the Chair was active in soliciting contributions from the floor.

Some of the Groups also contributed to a Poster Display in the foyer of the meeting building, outlining their year's work. This is good practice and should be encouraged in future Plenary Meetings, as it allows Group members fully occupied with their own Group meeting to learn of progress in other Groups.

The Meeting has an additional value in enabling Group leaders to interact and arrange cooperative activities, and to obtain consensus and support for proposals on planned developments as contemporary issues arise. The many opportunities for personal contact between Group members, and other interested participants, often lead to individual invitations to present the work of ECTN to departmental staff in other institutions, even in different countries.

The work of the Groups is also featured in a well-maintained Website, which is accessed more and more frequently each year; and in a regularly produced Newsletter edited by Dr P Mimero – CPE Lyon.

It is clear from this brief survey that the Working Groups are upholding their reputation for seizing initiatives, following them through to completion, and disseminating the results, using the expertise and voluntary hard work of their members. Over the three cycles of ECTN, their output has been outstanding.

The Business of the Network and the Association.

Through the year the business of the Network and the Association is carried on by the elected Administrative Council of ECTNA (President: Prof H-G Schmalz – U Köln); and the Management Committee of ECTN (Coordinator: Prof A Smith – CPE Lyon), which includes the leaders of the current Working Groups. The Plenary Meeting affords an opportunity for feedback to the members of the Association and Network, and to transact such business as is necessary; e.g. accepting the financial statement, amending the statutes, and debating policy proposals – this year, participation in TechnoTN, and plans to develop a Euroqualification framework. Both proposals were approved. As all members are entitled to send a delegate, a plenary session for business is in effect an ECTNA Assembly or AGM; this year it was run smoothly and effectively by the President.

This system could be said to work well, but whereas the Council and Committee have their separate responsibilities (even though they arrange to meet at the same time), the task of ‘internal dissemination’ of information to the members seems to be artificially separated at the Plenary Meeting. There is no doubt that all participants are thoroughly well informed during the separate meetings for ECTN and ECTNA, but it might be worth considering combining them. Trying to maintain the distinction could be confusing to members, and results in some duplication.

There were no elections for members of the Council this year, but the democratic function of the meeting was exercised satisfactorily in the election of four new members for the Eurobachelor/Euromaster Label Committee, with all Association delegates entitled to vote.

Plans for the Future

After the undoubted success of ECTN 3 *The new generation of chemists*, the Management Committee of the Network has drawn up and submitted another ‘broad and ambitious’ bid for funding from the European Commission (ECTN 4) with the aim of providing a complete contemporary picture of chemistry in Europe by 2009. As well as continuing with several of the projects indicated above, especially those relating to good practice, there are plans to incorporate employability, mobility, professional and generic skills, the effectiveness of teaching methods and educational research, and enhancing the value of EU projects in chemistry, more prominently into the new programme ... if the bid is successful. Two new Working Groups are proposed (*Employability of Chemistry Graduates*, and *Innovation in Chemistry Teaching*), and when put to the meeting, there was no shortage of volunteers willing to participate if they were to be formed. Later a third Group – *Linking Chemistry with Chemical Technology* – would be set up. Next year’s Plenary Meeting will be held in San Sebastian, Spain.

A very positive attitude from both the Administrative Council and the Management Committee towards the continuation of ECTN was evident throughout, and this was most encouraging. Members of the network are still alive to suggestions, like their willingness to strive for ‘added value’ to supplement Working Group meetings, perhaps by providing a local event for the benefit of the host institution as well as participants. There are still important roles for the Network to fulfil in developing useful contacts; in the promotion of exchange and mobility; in analysing and discussing issues relevant to chemistry (especially chemistry education) within a European dimension; and in defining European standards.

The vigour of the Network and the enthusiasm of its members is as high as ever, and it is to be hoped that funding will be made available to extend their work into the next three years.