

From the President



A few months ago I received some interesting material about the chemical industry in the Netherlands. It came from the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, in Canberra, and I followed up by asking them if their industry was experiencing any difficulty in finding suitably qualified people for employment in their

chemical industry, and the response was very interesting. Information was provided by Mr Nelo Emerencia of the Association of the Netherlands Chemical Industry (VNCI), who made the following points.

The Dutch chemical industry is expecting a shortage of adequately skilled personnel in the coming 5 to 10 years. The main reasons are retirement of the so-called 'baby boom' generation, an increased demand for technically skilled people to enable expansion and innovation, and a reduced influx of students into technical degrees. Against this medium-term scenario, this year has seen an increase in enrolments into technical degrees.

To address the expected shortage of chemists, the Dutch chemical industry has started an extensive program to encourage students to study for technical degrees and to improve the transition between education and the job market. A special project team called the Regiegroep Chemie has drafted a Roadmap Human Capital for this purpose. Implementation was due to start in the fourth quarter of 2007. The Roadmap's aims are to attract 40% more vocational and 35% more academic students to the sector by 2016. Currently, approximately 30 000 vocationally trained and 5000 academically trained chemists are working in the sector.

In February 2005, the VNCI and the Royal Netherlands Chemical Society (KNCV) also commissioned a research project into the labour market of the chemical industry. Conducted by the Research Centre for Education and the Labour Market (ROA) of the University of Maastricht, data of 20 000 graduates in 2003 in the fields of chemistry or chemical technology were analysed. The ROA also gauged the needs of employers. The report concluded that chemistry graduates took longer to find a job in their field in 2003 than any other graduates in the exact sciences. On the other hand, fewer were unemployed one-and-a-half years after graduation and most of them, by this stage, had found a job that closely matched their level and focus of education.

The researchers explained the difficulty finding employment upon graduation by the specialised nature of the sector and the

fact that competencies of recent graduates often do not match the requirements of employers. The problem does not seem to be caused by a surplus of graduates. In fact, companies in the chemical industry have reported difficulties in finding qualified personnel. In contrast to other sectors, they have more vacancies, which take longer and are more difficult to fill. More often than other companies, they need to employ personnel from abroad, they experience higher work pressures and they are often forced to engage underqualified staff.

To summarise, the report identified a shortage of graduates rather than a shortage of jobs in the chemical industry. Once employed in the industry, graduates had a better position in the labour market than many graduates of other specialisations.

By way of precaution, the report makes three comments. First of all, the number of companies in the chemical sector is quite small. Second, the research team conducted their investigations in 2001 at a time when the industry was booming and, third, the research does not distinguish between higher and lower educated employees.

You can find the report on the ROA Website (www.roa.unimaas.nl) under 'publications'. The VNCI and KNCV can be contacted through their websites: www.vnci.nl and www.kncv.nl

Returning to the jobs issue, we talked about this at the Chemistry Leaders Conference (CLC) held in Canberra on 1 February. The CLC was the successor to the long-running PHODs (Professors and Heads of Chemistry) meeting, and although the agenda and attendance moved only a short distance from the PHODs formula, we seem to have made a good start in broadening on both fronts. The discussion at the CLC reinforced the view that emerged from our Future of Chemistry study, that many graduates were not job-ready and that many employees were not prepared to regard the first few months of employment as a training period. Nonetheless, we heard of some heartening practice on the latter count. We also heard that many graduates with overseas qualifications had not had the sort of preparation that we expect for local graduates and consequently had difficulty finding employment in their designated fields.

Finally, the CLC reinforced the need for adequate laboratory experience during undergraduate chemistry degrees, while recognising that provision of enough hours was increasingly difficult for universities. There was also some yearning for the honours degree (four years study) becoming the basic qualification.

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