

From the President



Yet another review! This time it was the review of higher education, and I went along to represent RACI at a consultation with two members of the review panel, its chair Professor Denise Bradley (who was until recently vice-chancellor at the University of South Australia) and Mr Bill Scales. The absent panel members - they are

sharing out a heavy workload - were Mr Peter Noonan and Dr Helen Nugent.

Since I was representing the profession, and not just one subsection of it, I took up a matter that has been troubling our employer-members for some time: the lack of work-readiness of graduate chemists. I linked this to another long-running itch, the reduction in hours devoted to laboratory work in university chemistry courses and one of the underlying causes of this, inadequate funding, especially for 'professional' degrees. I was able to quote our *Future of chemistry* report, a copy of which I have forwarded to the panel, which noted that while there was no overall shortage of chemistry graduates, there was strong unmet demand for those with at least some experience.

I was surprised to find that we are not alone in this. The consultation session I attended was one for professional organisations and so my confrères around the table were medical doctors, engineers, accountants (several breeds), physiotherapists and so on. Once I had said my piece, they joined in to say it was exactly the same in their professions. Only the medical doctors seem to have the remedy, and that was administered by their colleges, which prepared doctors for life after internship.

After I prepared my contribution, I took the logical next step of wondering what we can do about our problem, because I thought someone was sure to ask. Nobody did. I already felt that calling for more money for universities was unlikely to be a useful way forward and the dilemmas of the other professions made it clear that we could not expect any special treatment. We are not really in a position to demand an honours degree as the entry point to our profession, since we can't control what employers will do, but if they prefer to hire at BSc rather than BSc(Hons) level, then they know what to expect. Some organisations provide postgraduate courses, and I know that some of our Branches do this although there is no national coordination and it's hard to see how there

could be. I wondered whether industry experience was the path to upskilling - it certainly helped me along, but there seem to be few vacation jobs in chemistry these days. I'd be interested to hear other suggestions.

There is an intersection here with something that our President Elect, Bob Watts, has been developing about membership and subscriptions. Bob spoke about this at the May Assembly and his thoughts have stimulated discussion among Board members. They caused me, too, to think about the nature of RACI as an organisation. We started as a qualifying body, deciding not to run our own examinations (as the prototype institute in Britain did) but insisting on specified preparation and qualification before granting membership. Accompanying this was accreditation of chemistry degrees and diplomas. These provisions still exist, but as far as I can ascertain the RACI has never been able to offer anything as tangible as job preference to those admitted as members. We have failed to achieve one of the basic aims of the founding fathers but we have gone on pretending in public that we have. More recently we have been finding that some universities are unable to meet our accreditation requirements but of course they do their best to see that graduates have been well prepared.

The RACI histories, unpublished but informative, make it clear that within a few years of its foundation the qualifying-body nature of the ACI (we became RACI much later) was already accompanied by activities that were more representative of a chemical society. The American Chemical Society and the Royal Society of Chemistry are nowhere near as tough as we are about membership qualifications, and I have been wondering to myself (and occasionally to other people) what would happen if we bit the bullet, gave up the accreditation fantasy, and became a chemical society. We could retain our name, but it would be more honest and also a signal of change if we were to become the Royal Australian Chemical Society (RACS), the Australian Chemical Society (ACS), the Australian Society of Chemists/Chemistry (ASC) or even follow the engineers and become Chemists Australia or Chemistry Australia.

The Board discussed these things at its August meeting, and you will hear more about it in the months ahead and have a chance to participate in discussions. Deciding on any changes will take us quite a while, if past experience is any guide, and so Bob Watts and the new Board will be responsible for carrying the process forward after November.

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