
Vice President's Column

IUPAC in a Changing World

We are constantly reminded of the fact that we live in a changing world. A number of experiences in our lives tell us so, and so do daily newscasts reaching us from all parts of the world. These influences affect us and, perhaps even without knowing it, we respond and adjust to the changing conditions to cope with new realities, to be able to deliver what is expected from us, or to feel more comfortable.

Organizations are not like human beings. That partly explains why most organizations, including international federations and unions, quite frequently do not respond to changing needs and demands as quickly as many would like. And that is also why most organizations have to be overhauled and revitalized every now and then to satisfy what the membership expects in return for the money and time spent year after year.

In this respect IUPAC is no exception to the rule (although some chemists still like to think it ought to be), so it is far from surprising that reorganization of the union became an informal topic for discussion decades ago. However, after the General Assembly in Lisbon in 1993, restructuring became gradually a formal item on IUPAC's agenda as well. Over the last 5-6 years the issue was the single most important subject dealt with by the union. As well-informed chemists will know, this process transformed IUPAC, from a union with appointed divisions and approved commissions with long lifetimes and rather static membership, to an organization with smaller, elected divisions and dynamic, short-lived project groups established after thorough international review of project proposals. The transition was complete by January 1st this year, so IUPAC is now operating in a restructured fashion, according to the so-called project-driven system.

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Some chemists are saying that this restructuring looks good, but what are the future benefits from all these changes for the chemical sciences and the chemical community? That is a good question, which cannot be answered with certainty before we see how IUPAC develops in the years to come. However, we know one thing for sure: The restructured IUPAC will only be able to fulfil its objectives and the expectations of the global chemical community if chemists from around the world

are actively engaged in addressing important global issues involving chemistry. The best guarantee for IUPAC success is, therefore, solid recruitment of good and dedicated chemists to all the union's activities.

Successful recruiting is not done in a flash; planning and strategy are paramount to get the right group of competent volunteers involved year after year. A critical factor in this endeavour is good contact with the chemical community world wide, particularly with the countries that are members or associate members of IUPAC. This requires close and vivid communication with both the



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National Adhering Organizations (NAOs) and the chemical societies in these countries. A crucial question therefore surfaces: Is the communication, in particular with the NAOs, good enough? Overall, I am convinced the answer is no, and a few examples illustrate why. For instance, when the 45 NAOs are contacted by mail regarding a matter of importance to the union, it is rare to receive more than five replies. And when all the NAOs are asked and encouraged to nominate national representatives to various groups, the feedback is usually not much better. That is a pity, because the union's officers have been elected to serve the chemical community, not to replace its members.

Based on these observations I am sure that the future success of IUPAC depends on better communication between the union and its stakeholders, whether the matters under consideration are related to advancement of research in the chemical sciences, promotion of services of chemistry to society, improvement of education in chemistry, or initiatives to advance the public appreciation of chemistry. In fact I believe that the chemical community, including the chemical industry, will not benefit properly from IUPAC unless the two-way communication with the membership improves significantly. I have therefore decided to focus on communication in my vice-president critical assessment. The NAOs will hear more about that shortly. In the meantime I urge individuals to supply comments and ideas regarding how to improve the union's communication skills and efficiency. Challenging and inspiring response is most welcome!

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