

Salters' Chemistry Camps

The Salters' Chemistry camps have been tremendously successful in attracting 14-15 year old students into university chemistry laboratories. Since their inception in 1998, when 100 students attended the first camps at York and Birmingham, well over 5,000 students have benefitted from the experience and in 2008 a peak number of 800 students attended 17 camps in chemistry departments throughout the UK.

The camps programme enables students to spend a relatively short but intensive period of time in a university chemistry department working with expert teachers and university - based chemists on pre - planned, intellectually challenging practical activities.

Having been directly involved in the camps programme since 1998, I have come to realize that participants also gain socially from the experience and that this is important in challenging prevailing negative views about chemistry. It is evident that the informal nature of the camps and the opportunity to work with positive role models, particularly young graduate chemists, encourages students to develop positive identities related to the study of chemistry and to connect those identities to the rest of their lives. Indeed enthusiasm for the subject often extends beyond laboratory sessions. I have witnessed first hand the sharing of intellectual curiosity between students from very diverse schools and it was satisfying to see a young student from a challenging school in Essex realize that there are kindred spirits beyond his school who also regard chemistry as a 'cool' subject and therefore find it acceptable to want to know more about complex ideas.

Furthermore, the increased sense of responsibility linked to working in well - equipped laboratories together with the autonomy gained through living in university student accommodation is a great motivator for many young students.

Data collected from camp exit evaluations show that as a direct result of their experience at a camp the majority of students were persuaded to carry on studying chemistry beyond GCSE.

An additional point is that, it is not just the students who gain from the experience. Expert teachers and chemists involved at each camp enjoy being able to share their specialised knowledge with enthusiastic students without the limitations of the curriculum and the pressures of examinations.

In conclusion, Audrey and her team have refined and developed the camps programme into a highly rated extra curricular event that is well regarded throughout the UK and beyond.

Elaine Wilson, University of Cambridge

January 2009