If you have ever spent hours carefully preparing a sumptuous feast only to have it eaten in minutes, you’ll have a fair idea of how I feel this morning. After months of meticulous preparation, the 2003 Life Science Careers Conferences were devoured in a flash by three large hungry audiences of undergraduates and postgraduates. The conferences were chewed over in King’s College London before moving up to UMIST and finally diffusing across the Welsh border into Cardiff. The students were given a menu of various career talks, and feedback suggests that the 2003 event was a resounding success.

Biochemistry Careers Conferences have been part of the Biochemical Society’s activities for as far back as anyone can remember and have been consistently well attended over the years. More recently, the conferences were expanded to encompass the whole of the life sciences when the Biochemical Society joined forces with several sister societies in a collaboration known formerly as the UK Life Science Committee (UKLSC). The conferences continue to be organized by seven life-science societies (see web address at the end for details) and are unique in that they are the only careers conferences in the UK dedicated solely to life-science students.

The 2003 cohort of conferences have had exceptionally good turnouts, with delegates numbering between 200 and 300 at each venue. Yet again, throughout the blustery month of November, hoards of students forwent their Saturday morning lie-ins across the land to hear an assortment of speakers talk about their diverse career paths and experiences.

Each of the day conferences comprised presentations given by twelve speakers from a range of career backgrounds encompassing occupations from both inside and outside the laboratory. Among others, there were talks on clinical biochemistry, research in large companies, science communication, patent law, technology transfer, medicine, teaching and voluntary work. The students were given the opportunity to ask questions throughout the course of the day and to browse the extensive exhibitions.

A big draw for many of the students came at lunchtime (no, not the buffet — though this was astoundingly good at Manchester!) when students were given the chance to participate in the ever-popular CV clinic. This service provides one-to-one advice from exhibitors, speakers and employers of life-science graduates and frequently receives positive acclaim on the feedback forms.

A special bonus for me in 2003 was the chance to attend the four-yearly Biochemistry Careers Conference in Dublin organized by our ever-active Irish Area Section driven by the dynamic Rosaleen Devery. The enthusiasm of the delegates indicated an undiminishing demand for live information that is fully interactive and fresh from the horse’s mouth. Yet another diverse programme highlighted the pros and cons of a variety of career paths with the all-important salary structure appearing as a common feature.

The students in attendance took the chance to meet and question the amenable and esteemed people giving the talks, and were happy to...
learn that, according to the Society’s 2001 graduate-employment survey, all Irish Biochemistry graduates surveyed had managed to find jobs.

The fact that most speakers gave out their personal contact details was testament to their dedication in helping these young people to get a foot in the door. It is satisfying to note that those students conscientious enough to drag themselves from their beds on a dark Saturday morning to attend the Life Science Careers Conferences are fittingly rewarded with careers guidance that is second to none. Thanks must go to all involved, especially the 30 dedicated speakers (and their families) for their good will and generosity and also to the universities who helped to promote these events to their students to make them the success that they are.

And so it is just as it is with the feast; as soon as the last dish has been washed up, it’s time to start over. As I write, plans are already being hatched for the next round of conferences in November 2004. The UKLSC has now been superseded by the newly formed Bioscience Federation Education Committee who are all set to make the conferences bigger and better than ever before. The dates and venues will be announced shortly at http://www.biochemistry.org/education/forthcoming.htm

On the subject of helping new scientists, it would be appropriate for me to mention here the Biochemical Society’s Summer Vacation Studentships. The studentships aim to support a handful of undergraduates each year by sponsoring them to undertake research of a biochemical nature under the guidance of a Society member working in a university or research institution during the summer vacation. Twenty-one high-quality applications were received in 2003 for these Studentships and six were selected for funding. In their short existence, the studentships have proved to be very worthwhile ventures for both students and departments alike; one beneficiary has even had some of her research published.

The research areas undertaken in 2003 and some of the students’ comments were:

- The role of MAP kinase activation in regulation of platelet nitric oxide production. Student: Clare Conway; Supervisors: Anne Graham and Khalid Naseem (Bradford, UK). “The project enabled me to gain first-hand experience of laboratory work and carry out procedures I otherwise would only have studied at a theoretical level.”
- Proteomic analysis of oocyte development. Student: Nicholas Lee; Supervisor: Cornelia de Moor (Nottingham, UK). “A very informative experience.”
- The application of biochemical techniques to study Antarctic microbial ecology. Student: Julie Tompkins; Supervisor: David Pearce (British Antarctic Survey, UK). “I learned a lot more than I had hoped.”
- Designing a lipid-bilayer-folding system for multi-drug efflux proteins of pathogenic bacteria. Student: Natalie Di Bartolo; Supervisor: Paula Booth (Bristol, UK). “It was a privilege to work amongst such dedicated and knowledgeable scientists.”
- Functional dissection of a recombinant RNA polymerase II-like enzyme. Student: Laura Pitts; Supervisor: Robert Weinzierl (Imperial College London, UK).
- Analysis of the role of dyskerin in the telomerase complex. Student: Marcus Adams; Supervisor: Stuart Knight (King’s College London, UK). “I have enjoyed the experience of working on my own project and gained many useful skills.”

Full reports of these projects can be found at the web address below.

The deadline for this year’s round of Studentships will be at the end of February 2004, and applications can be completed online at http://www.biochemistry.org/education/vacation.htm