

The European Materials Research Society looks east

The future of materials science and engineering increasingly depends on effective partnerships between industry and research laboratories, closer coordination between funding agencies, and collaborative efforts between disciplines. Moreover, because we live in a 'global village', partnerships are not only important at the national but also the international level.

The International Union of Materials Research Societies (IUMRS) was created to this effect in 1991, as an umbrella association of technical groups or societies that have an interest in promoting and coordinating interdisciplinary materials research. Within this community of societies, the US-based Materials Research Society (MRS) is undoubtedly the largest, with more than 12,000 members from academia and industry in more than 60 countries. Created in 1973, the MRS has grown from strength to strength, mainly because of the scientific quality and scope of its annual meetings.

In Europe, the community is represented by the European Materials Research Society (E-MRS), which was founded in 1983 to promote and enhance the efficiency of materials research across Europe. The Society's annual Spring meeting (held in Strasbourg since 1995) is growing fast, and with more than 1,500 scientists attending it has now become the most important European meeting in the field. However, compared to its MRS counterparts, it suffers from two major drawbacks. The scientific quality of the symposia presented at the meeting is high but it does not truly represent the broad scope of modern materials research. More importantly, the majority of its attendees come from Western Europe.

But change is afoot. Last month (September 15–19), the E-MRS organized its first Fall Meeting in central Europe (Krakow, Poland) with the goal of disseminating research findings, sharing experiences and furthering scientific contact between researchers from East and West. Sadly, in the final planning stages, the scope of the conference had to be reduced because it coincided with other related events taking place in Moscow (Nano and Giga Challenges in Microelectronics, September 15–16), Kiev (Science for Materials in the frontier of centuries: advantages and challenges, November 4–8) and Warsaw. To avoid any overlaps, and to improve coordination between the various national societies, several symposia were therefore cancelled or removed from the Krakow meeting. Regardless, its main role was to familiarize scientists from countries hoping to join the European Union (including Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic) with funding opportunities available to them through the various EU initiatives — such as the current sixth 'Framework' programme running from 2002 to 2006.

Nature Materials wishes all the success to this new venture and hopes that subsequent Fall meetings will become a regular event for promoting and enhancing the efficiency and visibility of materials research in Europe. Future meetings in the East will help broaden the overall scope of the E-MRS scientific symposia and its desire to emulate the success of the MRS meetings. Surprisingly, the EU, which in the early 1990s financially supported the

E-MRS to encourage more scientists from central and eastern European countries to get involved, did not give financial backing to this first Fall meeting.

More generally, one may ask whether enough is being done to increase the participation of central and eastern European countries in the research programmes run by the EU. The answer is clearly, 'No, not yet'. The E-MRS certainly has a role to play in lobbying the European Parliament on behalf of its members, but materials scientists all over Europe should also be more effective at communicating their needs and concerns to politicians and the public.

At a time when 11 candidate nations are being considered for EU membership in the next few years, there is good reason for the more affluent west to open its doors to the east and invest in common scientific programmes. But, although the Krakow meeting is a step in the right direction, more needs to be done to allow the scientific potential of these countries to be realized in a way that benefits the overall European materials research community.

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