

The Lunchtime Discussion Groups – a *raison d'être*

Dr Nina Alphey, originator of the Sciences Discussion Group and Daria Luchinskaya

The Lunchtime Discussion Groups are a unique feature of intellectual life at St Anne's. Run by the MCR, they are open to all members of College. The original idea behind the Sciences Discussion Group was to get graduate students away from the lab/computer/library to think and talk about wider issues surrounding the life and mathematical sciences, very broadly defined. The Principal and several Fellows are very supportive. We limit the numbers and meet in a comfortable room over sandwiches, to encourage informality and active involvement. This is not a seminar series, where an audience sits and listens, it is a *discussion* group.

Our guests can engage us in their topic however they choose, as long as it is interactive – most have given a short slide and/or or video presentation, and all have answered (and often asked us) numerous questions and generated a lively discussion. Participants generally rate the sessions as 'excellent' and sign up with comments like 'last week was brilliant' and 'count me in!' The group is talked-about inside and outside College, it has increased contacts between SCR, MCR and JCR, and we have attracted and impressed high-calibre guests such as Professor Dame Louise N. Johnson FRS, Lord May of Oxford OM AC Kt FRS and the editor-in-chief of Nature, Dr Phillip Campbell (who faced a lively audience interrogation).

The more recent Arts and Humanities Discussion Group does a similar thing for topics of interest mainly to arts, humanities and social science students and Fellows, and it too has secured eminent guest speakers (see Appendix). The labels are nominal; topics of broad appeal could equally well feature on either Thursday or Friday, it depends which team of organisers issued the invitation. Watch for details in email and paper notices and come along, whether you are a regular or dip in and out as the topics tempt you.

The discussions are enjoyed by scientists and non-scientists alike. The speakers address current and important issues, and the talks are accessible and interesting. The most challenging part is finding the time to go to them all!

Our guests have been very pleased with the attention and interest of the audience. Some of their positive responses can be seen below:

'In general, I do not think the University does enough by way of addressing the larger aspects of postgraduate education. Questions of ethics and responsible behaviour, when and where to publish, teaching responsibilities, handling bureaucratic demands (both reasonable and unreasonable) and much else beyond research will loom large in the lives of those who remain academic researchers. Equally, many will pursue highly important and productive careers outside academe (a fact often overlooked in graduate training). I think the "Science Discussion Group" at St Anne's is simply excellent, and more generally points the way to the need for larger such activities within Oxford University.'

Professor Lord (Robert) May of Oxford OM AC Kt FRS, President of The Royal Society (2000-2005), Chief Scientific Adviser to the UK Government and Head of the UK Office of Science and Technology (1995-2000).

'I had a very interesting time speaking to the St Anne's graduate discussion group ... It was a wonderfully informal, interdisciplinary group ... The (human) chemistry was great.'

Frank Kelly, Professor of the Mathematics of Systems, University of Cambridge, and former Chief Scientific Adviser to the UK Department of Transport.

As for what the students thought, reviews of the Arts and Humanities Discussion Group delights can be read in the next few articles.

