



President's Column

Peter Forrester*

It's early in the year, but the activity level in Australian mathematics circles is particularly high. Not only is it the time of year of the ANZIAM meeting, which as I write is just about to get under way in Newcastle, the finish of the AMSI summer school (hosted this year by the University of Melbourne), and when ARC grant writing is a priority—all annual events—but there are some important one-off things happening too.

The first of these is the launch of the International Year of the Maths of Planet Earth with the Simons Foundation lecture by Professor Simon Levin, 'The challenge of sustainability and the promise of mathematics' (special thanks are due to AMSI in the organisation, including securing the Chief Scientist Professor Ian Chubb to give the opening address). The lecture was captivating on many different levels, one of which was on how mathematical research has an essential role to play in a multidisciplinary endeavour. Generally, this theme year offers us an opportunity to promote the relevance of mathematics to the wider community. The AMSI board chair, Dr Ron Sandland, has taken this opportunity with an opinion piece 'Mathematics. Trust me. It's important in your life', on the ABC Science website. This is as a reply to the American writer Jodi Picoult's 'Calculus. Trust me. You will never use it.' as a recommendation from her adult self to herself as a 16-year-old.

Another special happening is the decadal plan. Given where mathematics in Australia is at present, and the national ambition to have our economy based more and more on research and innovation, the decadal plan will set our recommendations for policy makers to draw on. Presently written opinions are being called for; more information can be obtained from the website mathscidecadal.org.au.

It's not only an ongoing task to keep our discipline as a whole seen to be relevant and the way of the future, but long-term data of our AustMS membership numbers suggests the same is true of our Society. The records show that from the mid 1990s, the number of our ordinary members has declined from the high 700s to dip below 500 for the first time last year. Even from 2011 to 2012 we lost 30 members. Of course all Department Heads in the mathematical sciences are encouraged to see that membership of AustMS, being the professional society for Australian mathematicians, is seen as a hurdle requirement in staff appraisals. Beyond this, the AustMS steering committee is revisiting the core question of what AustMS has to offer its members. Feedback from one ECR suggests:

I think you could keep people interested by providing more small-scale events around the country that are more focussed on narrow research

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topics. The impression I have is that people view AustMS as a big convention once a year, which is difficult to get to and of questionable relevance. If these were to be more focussed events, in the big cities, with the AustMS brand, then I think people would feel more attached to it.

Undoubtedly views will differ on what further initiatives we can offer to best serve our members; the more opinions we hear the better decisions we can make, so please let us know.

One role of AustMS is to represent the interests of the discipline in political forums. The occasion for such representation arose recently upon the results of ERA 2012. Personally, I was one of the ERA panel members on the MIC cluster. Because of this, our outgoing President, Peter Taylor, has taken charge of making representation to the CEO of the ARC Aidan Byrne on our concerns. It wasn't long ago that the results of ERA 2010 were the talking point. One of the corner pieces of ERA 2010 was journal rankings. One comes across the use of these rankings in some surprising places (see for example the website for the Southeast Asian Mathematical Society). But these rankings were scrapped for ERA 2012, the reason given being that they drove undesirable behaviour, most obviously being to avoid publishing in certain journals, independent of their appropriateness for the research at hand. A big concern is the possible undesirable behaviour that may come out of the ERA 2012 methodology. One striking example is the possibility for an institution to score a 5 at the two digit level without any serious research program in the each of the main pillars of the mathematical sciences: Pure, Applied and Statistics. It is the position of AustMS that this is against the interests of the discipline, and that on this point at least the ERA 2012 methodology requires urgent revision.



Peter Forrester received his Doctorate from the Australian National University in 1985, and held a postdoctoral position at Stony Brook before joining La Trobe University as a lecturer in 1987. In 1994 he was awarded a senior research fellowship by the ARC, which he took up at The University of Melbourne. Peter's research interests are broadly in the area of mathematical physics, and more particularly in random matrix theory and related topics in statistical mechanics. This research and its applications motivated the writing of a large monograph 'log-gases and random matrices' (PUP, Princeton) which took place over a fifteen-year period. His research has been recognised by the award of the Medal of the Australian Mathematical Society in 1993, and election to the Australian Academy of Science in 2004, in addition to several ARC personal fellowships.