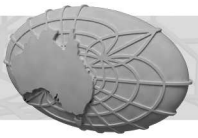

President's Column

Peter Forrester*

With the dawn of the 'Asian century' firm in my mind, I set out during the break between semesters to the National University of Singapore, to initiate a new collaboration with a recently appointed tenure track assistant professor. The mathematics building appears to be very new. Along the walls of my 5th-floor visitors office were various posters featuring famous mathematicians. The poster right outside my door featured Terence Tao, written as such, with a Chinese translation to the side, and Australia written beneath to form the remainder of the heading. That was great to see. Also, my host is part of the probability group there. The senior member of the group, Professor Louis Chen, was, until recently, the long-serving Director of the Institute for Mathematical Sciences at NUS. He spoke warmly of a number of other Australian mathematical sciences researchers, including Peter Hall, Neil Trudinger and their next visitor, Aihua Xia. Professor Chen and a number of other department members there had just returned from the Asia Mathematical Conference in Busan, South Korea. He conveyed the news that there was talk of the formation of an Asian Mathematical Union. This is of course potentially an important development for the interests of the mathematical sciences in Australia.

Generally visiting overseas institutions one hears, sooner or later, some talk of league tables of universities, or of disciplines within universities. This time last year I had just returned from a visit to a Mathematics Department at a particular university in the US. They had recently appointed a Fields Medalist and I heard it said that the competitiveness of that department in comparative rankings played a factor in this recruitment decision. Other talk I've been privy to has claimed that some universities are using league tables to make decisions about tenure (locally that notion has passed into history — read tenure then as transferring from probation to a continuing position). Specifically, the claim is that candidates are being compared against others recently granted tenure in similarly ranked universities, wherever they may be in the world.

This latter point begs the question as to what qualities are being compared? Here at the University of Melbourne, we are being asked by the Deputy Dean (Research) — who happens to be the outgoing AustMS President, and newly awarded ARC Laureate Fellow, Peter Taylor — for input into specifying research performance measures at the departmental level. Hearing about this, my first reaction was that the ARC has just carried out a rather extensive (not to mention

*Email: President@austms.org.au

expensive) research assessment exercise by way of ERA. But then I was told that locally a measure is being sought which quantifies research performance on a year-to-year basis, and will potentially feed into the annual staff appraisals. My mind cast back to the early days of my career as an academic at La Trobe in the late 80s, and specifically to a document authored by Peter Stacey and Glenn Fulford 'Some thoughts on the measurement of objectives', which was circulated as a discussion paper in response to a document put forward by the Department Head, the late Ed Smith, on meeting departmental objectives. The discussion paper draws on the study 'Quality measures in Universities', produced by Professor Paul Bourke of CTEC in 1986. It suggests the use of a suitable citation index (although not discussing the time lag before this becomes meaningful), peer review (commented to be time consuming), number of dissertations accepted, consultancies, invitations to high-level conferences, membership of learned academies and the award of prizes, amongst other measures. Sounds very familiar — these are essentially the ERA indicators, with one of two additions. With those additions noted, this can by the passage of time be taken as a consensus on the indicators, although they're not all relevant on a per year basis. Personally I'm more in favour of the ERA approach, were 'quality' is sought to be quantified on a time scale of several years. Maybe in the short term, a more modest aim would be to quantify an individual's 'activity level' instead.

I was writing the above on a Saturday afternoon in my office. Returning home, switching on the ABC news with a few minutes to go before the sports report, there was our Chief Scientist Professor Ian Chubb, very much batting for the cause of striving for the highest standards of mathematics (and science) education in our secondary education. This was followed a few days latter by a new Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) strategy, all of which are very welcome by AustMS.

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.