

President's Newsletter: October 2011

The expression *may you live in interesting times* is reportedly a curse, and the past year has given those of us involved in UK higher education plenty of evidence as to why this might be so. Significant changes include the raising of undergraduate fees to £9,000 pa at most English universities, with a knock-on effect on funding throughout the rest of the UK; final discussions on the rules for the Research Excellence Framework (REF, the successor to the RAE), the most controversial of which include measuring the non-academic "impact" of research; and EPSRC's new policy of "Shaping Capability" (but more on this later).

Fortunately life within the Society has been less revolutionary, and our core activities of talks, the Proceedings (PEMS), grant giving, and the Burn postgraduate conference have again flourished. Full details on these and the application procedure for our grant schemes are available from the relevant sections of the Society's web pages. We have also invested in some "back office" improvements to our database and website, and maintain a close working relationship with ICMS (the International Centre for Mathematical Sciences), which now also provides administrative support for our main committee meetings.

The Society's 2010-11 lecture programme featured a wide range of excellent talks by eminent speakers, and thanks are again due to our Meetings Secretary, Tom Lenagan, and the local reps for organizing such an interesting and varied programme. Unfortunately the elements intervened in our programme again (severe snow this year, rather than volcanic ash) and forced the cancellation of the scheduled December talk by Professor John Maddocks. However, I am pleased to report that we have managed to "rebook" John, and he is due to speak at Glasgow this November.

Our second "Popular Lecture" was given by Max Neunhoeffler (who is already well known to the Society as an organiser of the Burn postgraduate meetings). Max's talk, *Sudoku and Mathematics*, well lived up to its billing, drawing one of the largest and most varied audiences I can remember at a Society meeting. The following month, an even larger audience attended the lecture by Fields Medallist Professor Terry Tao (with several people sitting on the stairs!).

The International Review of Mathematical Sciences (IRMS) panel meetings took place in December 2010, under very difficult travel conditions. The community is indebted to the huge amount of work expended on the IRMS by many people, especially of course by the international panellists, but I would also like to single out Ken Brown from Glasgow, who was the EMS representative on the IRMS Steering Committee. The report is available from EPSRC at www.epsrc.ac.uk and two of the main findings (F1/F2) are that: *overall, mathematical sciences research in the UK is excellent on an international scale* and that this high quality *depends critically on the diverse and distributed research community*.

A less optimistic finding is (F6): *communication between the mathematical sciences research community and EPSRC is less open and clear than it should be*, and the validity of this will be obvious to anyone who has kept abreast of recent developments, in particular EPSRC's

decision to restrict all fellowships in mathematical sciences to a single research area (statistics and applied probability). There has been an unprecedented outpouring of opposition to this, particularly at the loss of positions at the postdoctoral level (a good source of background material is maintained by Burt Totaro at www.dpmms.cam.ac.uk/~bt219/epsrc.html), and I am in no doubt that this appalling decision will be profoundly damaging to UK mathematics and to early career mathematicians. Unfortunately I have seen nothing from EPSRC that gives me even a glimmer of hope that it will be overturned.

The Society's main involvement in UK "policy" issues is through its membership of the Council for Mathematical Sciences (CMS), which has been chaired by Frank Kelly since October 2010. I am personally very grateful to Frank for all that he has done as CMS chair, a view which I am sure is shared by all CMS members - we could not wish for a better ambassador during these "interesting" times. CMS has been very active this year, particularly in UK government events and policy submissions, and information is available at www.cms.ac.uk.

As the AGM approaches it is my pleasure to thank the very many people who give their time to the Society, on its committees, on the PEMS Board, and as EMS representatives to outside bodies. Thanks are due in particular to the Society's continuing officers: Tom Lenagan, Richard Steiner, Iain Gordon, Rob Archbold and Allan Grady; to those stepping down from the General Committee: Andy Hoyle, Jarek Kedra and James Mitchell; to Max Neunhoffer, the 2011 Burn meeting organiser; to Lyonell Boulton, our webmaster, to Jim Howie who steps down from PAG; and to Frances Reid for her work in the Society Office. I would also like to thank the School of Mathematics at the University of Edinburgh for its close and supportive relationship with the Society.

Special thanks are due to Elizabeth Gasparim who steps down as the Society's Librarian, in particular for all her work in collecting and collating information on our exchange journals, and to Marit Hartveit for her invaluable work as Assistant General Secretary and on the Society's archive. I am also indebted to Sandy Davie, the retiring General Secretary, for much help and advice over the past two years, and wish him a very happy retirement. I am sure that when he started as a young lecturer he didn't expect to spend his last "working" afternoon at an EMS Investment Committee meeting!

Finally, I would like to conclude by saying a very special thank you to Colin Campbell, who has served the Society with distinction over many years. Apart from a few short gaps he has been a full or attending member of what we now call the General Committee since 1979 - as a local representative, chief editor of PEMS, Vice President, and of course President from 2005-07. Colin now steps down as convener of the Education Committee, a role he has held for four years.

I wish my successor, Mark Chaplain, an enjoyable and fulfilling period of office, and hope that it coincides with good news rather than *interesting times* for UK and Scottish mathematics.

Penny Davies