



President's column

Michael Cowling

The President of the Australian Mathematical Society takes office after the Annual General Meeting of the Society, which in turn takes place toward the end of the Annual Conference. So I took office during the meeting at RMIT University, organised by Kathy Horadam and her team, which was a highly successful event. In fact, it was the best attended Annual Conference that the Society has had for many years. I therefore begin by congratulating Kathy and the Program Committee for arranging an excellent range of speakers—these are important in attracting participants—and for running a very pleasant and interesting week for all of us who came.

As I begin my first President's report, I am intensely aware that there have been remarkable achievements in the Mathematical Sciences in Australia in the last few years, due in no small measure to the efforts of my predecessor Tony Guttman. I am referring in particular to the Australian Mathematical Sciences Institute (AMSI), the International Centre of Excellence for Education in Mathematics (ICE-EM), and the Centre of Excellence in Mathematics and Statistics of Complex Systems (MASCOS). While mathematicians have previously been awarded a Centre of Excellence (at the ANU), we have not previously obtained the recognition of the importance of our role which AMSI and ICE-EM signify.

Despite these successes, however, the situation of Mathematics in universities (which is where most of our members work or worked) in Australia still seems gloomy.

And one has to ask why this is so. One obvious answer is that very few students perceive Mathematics to be a viable career choice, and this is at least in part due to the low visibility of mathematicians who work outside universities and schools. There is a new discipline of “business analytics” (see, for instance, <http://www.iapa.org.au>) which might loosely be described as mathematics, statistics and information science applied in a commercial environment; there are many advertisements for jobs in the area, and most of these specify numerical skills in the essential criteria and business knowledge as a desirable but not essential extra. If this discipline were called “business mathematics”, then there might be more students in university mathematics courses, and the members of Mathematics Departments might feel more optimistic. Surely a part of the answer is to make the public aware of the importance of mathematics in the real world even though it is not always labelled mathematics.

Raising awareness of the mathematical sciences is part of the brief of AMSI, MASCOS and ICE-EM. I would argue strongly that the Society must, in cooperation with these bodies, work to this end. We do not have the resources or the staff that they do, but we will (I hope) still be around when their funding finishes, and we need to be able to pick up the baton and run on. I will commit myself to this, and I hope to be able to report some successes to you over the next two years.