



President's column

Michael Cowling

I spent two days last week at the Board meeting of FASTS (the Federation of Australian Scientific and Technological Societies), representing the Mathematical Sciences. This was an interesting meeting, but a little depressing. It is clear that some of the problems which beset our discipline are felt across many other disciplines. The FASTS Board spent quite a bit of time discussing ways in which professional societies (such as the AustMS) might attract more members, and ways in which postgraduate degrees might be made more relevant. There seemed to be a feeling that the sciences are no longer seen as being able to offer interesting and worthwhile careers to young people. I hope that the forthcoming review of the mathematical sciences will shed some light on ways in which we can attract more students into our profession. But the future of the AustMS is in our hands, and we cannot expect the review to offer us clues to the future.

I am interested in knowing the views of the *Gazette* readers on how the Society might make itself more attractive to potential members. The FASTS discussions focussed on benefits we might be able to offer, and the consensus seemed to be that publishing journals and running conferences is no longer enough. Certainly the editors of our journals report that very few Australian mathematicians submit papers, and this suggests that we are losing the battle to stay relevant there. Arguably this is due to our Science Citation Index impact factors, which are not as high as we would like them to be, but there is a vicious circle here, and I must exhort (once again)

members of the Society to consider submitting a paper or two to an Australian journal. The American Mathematical Society manages to provide financial services to its members, such as relatively inexpensive life insurance, and the Australian Medical Association has negotiated fee-free credit cards, but the AustMS is not big enough to have much bargaining power; anyway, bigger societies here in Australia which have explored these avenues say that they help to retain members but not to attract them. Professional societies which have a union-type role seem to be healthier—as long as they run a closed shop, which we cannot, and which is not something that we can reasonably aspire to in the present industrial relations climate.

What is the role of the Annual Conference? Legally, the Society has to have an annual meeting, which reviews the financial reports, summarises the achievements of the past year, and decides the strategy for the next year. Annual meetings also serve for younger members who are aspiring to mathematical careers to make themselves known, by giving talks on their work, and in countries where there is a healthier job market, the annual meeting continues to fulfill this role. And in the past, when we communicated by letters, the annual meeting offered members the occasion to exchange views “in real time” and to reinforce personal networks by personal contact.

Can it be that modern communications have reduced the need for this kind of interaction? I was looking through the file of a just-retired colleague recently, hoping to find juicy tidbits to relate at a dinner in his honour, and I was struck by some of the

older correspondence, especially that relating to his employment. In the 1970s, some thirty years ago, there was no email, and international telephone calls were prohibitively expensive, so that the sort of communication which goes on when someone applies for and is offered a position (on what date will the position be taken up, or will the university pay for the transportation of the new employee's two pianos, for instance) took a long time; these days it usually involves little more than a few emails and then an official letter of confirmation. Nowadays, we can collaborate by email as fast as we can write mathematics in \TeX , and the comparatively less expensive airfares of the moment mean that we can meet our collaborators in the flesh from time to time without needing the excuse of attending the annual meeting.

But surely we still need to build our networks and reinforce our relationships with personal contact? At times in the future, many of us will want to have a chat with that colleague from interstate whose work we'd like to read about one day, and others will want advice about dealing with a newly

arrived and clearly crazy boss, or even to change jobs. And annual conferences are a good way to make those contacts.

Part of the AustMS's problem is that the mathematical sciences are becoming more diffuse. Mathematics has had some triumphs recently: arguably five of the sixteen new Fellows of the Australian Academy of Science are mathematical scientists (at least some of the time; though not all are members of the Society), as are several Federation Fellows, and three of the twenty-four winners of 2005 Eureka Prizes for Science (awarded by the Australian Museum in Sydney in August 2005) used mathematics in their work in an essential way. But a number of these people do not identify themselves as mathematical scientists. I argue that if the Society is to continue to have a role to play in the future, we need to reinvent ourselves, to recognise that the nature of mathematics is changing. It is up to the members, older and (particularly) younger, to work out how we should do this. But it is in all our interests to do so!