President's column

Nalini Joshi[*]

How much regional engagement should the Australian Mathematical Society have? You may have heard the perennial joke about how to tell the difference between introverted and extroverted mathematicians: the extroverted ones look at *your* shoes! So my question is should we be looking at the shoes of Asian mathematical societies? You may have guessed at my answer already but let me give you the gist of my thinking.

Recently, I was invited to give a plenary lecture at the Asian Mathematics Conference[1], held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. It was the fifth in the series of Asian Mathematics Conferences (AMC) held under the aegis of the South East Asian Mathematical Society. This series started in 1990, in Hong Kong. The Korean Mathematical Society won the bid to host the next AMC in Busan, in 2013. You may have heard by now that Korea will also host the International Mathematics Congress in Seoul in 2014.

The AMC in Malaysia attracted more than 600 registered delegates and received approximately half its funding from the Malaysian government. There were other noteworthy features of this conference. Most of the people who came to ask me questions during the conference were students, some of them undergraduate students. Overwhelmingly, the questions were to do with mathematics, not just in my area but areas in which they were grappling with difficult problems. One of the young people I met gave me a new insight into a result I had on one of my slides. This was a slide I had shown in many talks, in many great mathematical institutions around the world. No one had pointed out this particular insight before.

These conversations served to remind me that mathematics is universal. Anyone, no matter what age, gender, or ethnicity is capable of insight. One of the greatest mathematicians of the last century[2] started out as a postal clerk in India and ended up a Fellow of the Royal Society. I would like to encourage us all to be more open to this possibility that great conversations can be had anywhere and that surprising insights can arise from unexpected meetings.

Of the 600 registered AMC delegates, only three were from Australian Universities, myself included. Until I was invited as a speaker, I had not heard of this series of conferences before. At least nine mathematical societies are part of the South East Asian Mathematical Society. Only four of these appear to have direct reciprocal membership agreements with our society, although the SE Asian Mathematical Society itself has a reciprocal membership with us. At the end of my talk, I

---

mentioned our upcoming annual conference. Many people asked me whether they would be 'allowed' to attend. Most had not heard of our event before.

I learnt about other events that occur in Asia on a regular basis. Did you know that there is an East Asian section of SIAM[3]? Its annual conference was held in June this year at the Universiti Brunei Darussalam. Its sixth annual conference will be held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in June 2010.

Another view of regional engagement came to me from our publishers, Cambridge University Press. One of the reasons they wanted to publish our journals is that they see us as an entry point into the Asian market, particularly the Chinese market. We are seen as a provider and shaper of high quality academic material which attracts Asian authors. CUP would like to help us grow in terms of visibility in the Asian market.

From my point of view, making more connections to regional societies is a positive sum game. Both sides win in this game. Many of us already have collaborators in Asia and students from Asia. Some have returned to their countries and maintain strong links with their previous supervisors. It is now easier to continue collaborative links through facilities such as the Access Grid and other programs such as Skype, especially because Asian time zones are close to Australian ones. Reciprocal membership can only help us grow in numbers. Finally, Australian mathematicians can only grow in exposure through the international activities that are focussed on Asia in the next five years, with the ICM 2010 in Hyderabad, India and ICM 2014 in Seoul, Korea.

At the very least, I will suggest that we highlight conferences like the ones I have mentioned in our society web pages. I hope you will agree that supporting reciprocal membership agreements with all regional mathematical societies is a good thing. Please let me know if you have any other ideas.

Nalini Joshi has held the Chair of Applied Mathematics at the University of Sydney since 2002. In 2008, she was elected a Fellow of the Australian Academy of Science. She is currently Head of the School of Mathematics and Statistics.

---

[3] http://jnumath.kr/easiam/