



President's column

Nalini Joshi*

In preparation for the panel discussion involving regional Heads of Mathematical Societies from Asia in Seoul in December 2009, I went through the list of our members at the time to do a small analysis of our distribution. As usual with the perusal of any collection of numbers and records, I discovered more than I expected and the results stirred up more questions than I could answer.

In December, we had 999 members¹. It came as a surprise to me to discover, for example, that as many as 45% of our members are also members of the ANZIAM Division and that we have an almost equal proportion of members with mailing addresses in Asia (3.3%) as in North America (3.6%). While 12% of our members are retired, not all of these reside in Australia. Only 55% of our members are ordinary members, with the remainder being retired members, reduced rate members, life members, reciprocal members, honorary members, educational members and so on. The smallest proportion is the category of sustaining members, of which we have three².

Questions that arose in my mind were how many of these members work in or are associated with an educational establishment, such as a university or a school? How many are in government research institutions, such as CSIRO or DSTO? How many work in the commercial sector, such as in banks, trading companies or consulting companies? Unfortunately, the details we currently ask from our members do not provide us with this information. We cannot deduce the information from our members' contact addresses, because many provide personal rather than work addresses.

One problem with the lack of such information is that without it, AustMS cannot effectively monitor and respond to issues from all of Australia's professional workforce in the mathematical sciences. Many of the individual responses I have received from members of the public after the appearance of newspaper articles or airing of interviews, on the parlous state of mathematics in Australia, are from mathematically trained people who pursue the quantitative solution of problems in the context of biological, financial, defence or other applications in their work. If we do not hear these people's concerns within the normal processes of AustMS, we cannot effectively be their collective representative.

I know anecdotally that we have many members who do not work for universities or schools. I know that when we run workshops for early career researchers, the

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¹It should be noted that we still count those who have not paid their membership fees in the current year as members.

²These members pay a modest \$220 per year, which is double the ordinary rate of membership. I encourage more of you to consider becoming sustaining members.

term 'researchers' has caused sensitivities because it implies that we are restricting our attention only to those who will work in universities. If we want to represent members outside universities and schools, we will need to know more about issues that concern them and give a voice to their concerns.

To make sure that we hear these voices, AustMS is pursuing an offer from a member to help design a survey. Take a moment to consider why you are a member of AustMS: is it so that you can attend meetings, workshops and conferences? Is it to support the profession? Is it to keep in touch with colleagues? Is it to maintain accreditation? Or is it to continue to receive the *Gazette* and discounted access to our journals? We have consulted longstanding members who are not in the university sector to guide us on the design of the survey so that we can move towards hearing more from those in the private and government sectors.

There are many other pieces of information I would have liked to have seen in our membership list. One of these is gender. Of course in many cases, this can be deduced from personal names. However, many members provide initials rather than personal names. Also, conclusions drawn from personal names can be erroneous, especially when the names do not originate from one underlying culture.

I know that many would prefer not to provide such information. One development on the horizon is to allow each member the right to determine and adjust whatever additional information they provide by accessing their membership record securely on our website. This process is well under way, with the help of our webmaster, Dr Ross Moore.

Later in the year, the AustMS Council will also be considering a resolution which, if approved, will have the effect of swelling our membership numbers. The resolution proposes free AustMS membership for all students enrolled in an Australian tertiary institution for a period of up to ten years. This idea, discussed by Council and by the Society at the Annual General Meeting in September 2009 in Adelaide, was proposed in the hope that it will encourage undergraduate students to sign up as members and continue their membership into their postgraduate training period, if that is the way they go. Hopefully, the lengthy period of membership would lead to an affectionate continuing relationship with AustMS in their subsequent career.

These are interesting times for the mathematical sciences in Australia. To have more people outside the tertiary education sector become members and vocal supporters would only add to the volume of our concern about the dire state of mathematical education in our society.



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