



# President's Column

**Peter Forrester\***

As I write, it is day 2 of the 57th annual meeting of AustMS, hosted by the University of Sydney.

In the opening addresses by the University of Sydney Vice Chancellor Professor Michael Spence, and New South Wales Chief Scientist and Engineer Professor Mary O'Kane, there was both some championing of our cause, and the issuing of some challenges. Thus it was pleasing to have highlighted the worrying trend of opting out of mathematics at high school and its obvious conflict with the push for STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) literacy as a core outcome in general schooling.

As a challenge, Vice Chancellor Spence made a call for the mathematics community to 'recapture the imagination of the people', while Chief Scientist and Engineer O'Kane appealed for a broad-minded approach to our annual meeting, in which mathematics applied to engineering, computer science and technology would be represented in special sessions.

Indeed, ways to meet these challenges are being implemented by AustMS and our partners at AMSI. Programs are in place to bring out to Australia special international lecturers (Stephen Boyd, Akshay Venkatesh, Claus Ringel and Sommer Gentry are current examples); modern media is used to publicise local achievements (e.g. the YouTube interview of the most recent AustMS medal recipient, Craig Westerland); there are special sessions at the annual meeting on Maths of Planet Earth following the success of the mid-year conference on that theme, which in turn brought together many mathematical scientists from outside of academia. New ideas are being mooted. Council member Kate Smith-Miles suggested holding a combined AustMS/ANZIAM meeting as a way to further facilitate a broad outlook, and AMSI director Geoff Prince is seeking ways to have publicised the tribute paid by 2012 AustMS medallist Stephen Keith in his lecture on day 1 of the annual meeting to his school maths teacher for his mathematical achievements.

In the lead-up to the annual meeting, Council meets to discuss various planning and policy issues. Undoubtedly the most robust debate centred around the request from the ANZAMP (Mathematical Physics) Special Interest Group to become a Division of the Society. In 2011 ANZAMP's status as a Special Interest Group was approved by Council, after requesting the immediate status of a Division. Presently the only Division of AustMS is ANZIAM, which has around 220 members. Much of the debate centred around the meaning of a Division in terms of representing numbers of the AustMS membership, and in the end Council decided that a

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threshold of around 80 Ordinary Members would be required. Earlier, I had read out my President's report. I noted that in my President's column, published in the *Gazette* in July, I highlighted that many future challenges of our discipline require a unified, collective response, and that much effort had been made within AustMS over many years to unite different interest groups and to represent our membership base in a fair, nonpartisan way. I commented that by its very name, a Division is not speaking on behalf of the unified body, and so I am not at all in favour of supporting any moves for a new Division within AustMS.

The lead-up to the annual meeting saw two other notable events. One was the Early Career Workshop, held in the Blue Mountains, and the other was the Women in Mathematics dinner. Apart from some stress caused by unpredictable public transport troubles, I heard nothing but rave reviews of the Early Career Workshop, both from the viewpoint of the participants, and presenters. From this coming February in Rotorua, the workshop will alternate between the AustMS and ANZIAM meeting, with two workshops being held in even years, and a short workshop not requiring overnight accommodation in odd years. I got to attend the Women in Mathematics dinner, an initiative of former AustMS President Nalini Joshi. I was quite blown away by the amount of energy that is being harnessed in a positive and inclusive manner, and found the Q&A session with Natashia Boland and Sommer Gentry inspiring for all.

Next year will see the ICM in South Korea. For a number of years it was AustMS policy to make a bid for the 2018 ICM. However, after some preliminary investigations it became apparent that this intention was premature, and that a longer time frame for preparation would be required. AustMS together with AMSI have set aside funds to support up to three early career researchers to attend the 2014 ICM, and who furthermore harbour the desire to work towards a future Australian bid. One hurdle to be overcome is the disappointment caused by the release of the speakers for the 2014 ICM — there is not a single Australian among them, notwithstanding IMU guidelines that require the Program Committee to take into account geographical/regional distribution.



Peter Forrester received his Doctorate from the Australian National University in 1985, and held a postdoctoral position at Stony Brook before joining La Trobe University as a lecturer in 1987. In 1994 he was awarded a senior research fellowship by the ARC, which he took up at The University of Melbourne. Peter's research interests are broadly in the area of mathematical physics, and more particularly in random matrix theory and related topics in statistical mechanics. This research and its applications motivated the writing of a large monograph 'log-gases and random matrices' (PUP, Princeton) which took place over a fifteen-year period. His research has been recognised by the award of the Medal of the Australian Mathematical Society in 1993, and election to the Australian Academy of Science in 2004, in addition to several ARC personal fellowships.