



# President's Column

**Peter Forrester\***

Recently I received notice of the AMSI access grid room national seminar 'A new era in the development of our science: the American mathematical research community, 1920–1950', by Professor Karen Parshall of the University of Virginia. What caught my eye was the portion of the abstract referring to the 'corporation' and 'capitalisation' of the American Mathematical Society as key members worked to raise private, governmental and foundational monies. This immediately brought to my mind the far-sightedness of the founders of AustMS in their action of initiating the Society's journals. In addition to the international recognition that these bring, they have been an invaluable source of revenue. In more recent years, the decision to no longer self publish, but rather to become titles of Cambridge University Press has similarly been shown to be well judged. Notwithstanding the many issues facing academic publishers in the web era, CUP has managed to increase its global subscriptions, thanks mainly to emerging universities in China. This in turn has generated an essential component of the AustMS budget right up to the present. New revenue sources must of course be explored, with one idea presently being investigated being that of a capitation fee per delegate at the annual conference.

On another revenue-centred news item, the federal budget proposal to revise funding tiers for commonwealth supported places (CSP) sees mathematics now bracketed with science and engineering. If this was to become legislation, from 2016 universities will be receiving more than 20% extra funding per CSP mathematics and statistics student. This funding alignment of mathematics with science and engineering can be viewed as an acknowledgement of the foundational role that mathematics plays in these disciplines, something which has been championed by the office of the Chief Scientist and AMSI, amongst others. But exactly how this will affect undergraduate education in the mathematical sciences remains to be seen. The 2007 budget saw a similar percentage increase to the funding of CSP mathematics and statistics students, following a recommendation of the National Strategic Review of Mathematical Sciences Research in Australia released late the year before. History shows that little of this, and in some cases none at all, made its way to the departments. The central university uses approximately 50% of funding for its operating costs, then allocates money to faculties, which in turn allocate money to schools and departments. Basically, the university is under no obligation to pass on the 20% funding increase to the benefit of mathematics and statistics students.

With CSP funding to science and engineering reduced in the budget, one concern is that a subvention policy at the faculty level will see the money diverted. AustMS

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\*Email: [President@austms.org.au](mailto:President@austms.org.au)

calls on all universities to honour the federal governments initiative to fund CSP mathematics students at the same rate as science and engineering students. This apparent funding increase comes at a critical time in the teaching of our undergraduate students. As I've alluded to in a recent President's Column, we are right in the middle of a dramatic disengagement of the student body from our lectures. Just how real this is was only too evident in my recently concluded 3rd year level complex analysis course. The lectures were all at the student unfriendly time of 9 am, and were available through lecture capture. In the Tuesday lecture before Easter, I counted up that the total attendance was a meagre 29—I say meagre because the official enrollment is actually 118. With the numbers not much better for the rest of the week, I decided that something had to change. The Easter break gave me an opportunity to do some on-line research. The main lesson I learnt was that the lecturer needs to offer the students in attendance something they can't otherwise get. Very dangerous for student surveys at the least, with the overwhelming majority not in attendance. What I did was introduce 'practice exam question' for each of the last twelve lectures. Time was allocated each lecture for the students in attendance to work through some sample exam type questions. I asked for them to hand in their workings at the end of the lecture in exchange for the worked solutions. Students who weren't in attendance had to email me personally to get the answer sheet, and they were asked to give me feedback on their circumstances and attitudes relating to lecture attendance. This has provided me some useful feedback, but it didn't make much of a difference to numbers, which only occasionally bettered 1 in 3 in attendance. Later this month the FYI (First Year in Maths) network will be hosting a workshop 'Teaching Practices in Undergraduate Mathematics'. I've been invited to give the opening address, and very much look forward to attending in person (!) the many talks which relate to student engagement in their mathematics studies.



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.