



President's column

Michael Cowling

The next Annual Meeting of the Australian Mathematical Society will be held at the University of Western Australia, in Perth, at the end of September. The conference web site <http://www.maths.uwa.edu.au/~austms05/> has details of what will be a very interesting program, and how to register. I am looking forward to seeing many of you there, and I point out that registrations completed by August 1 will be at a lower rate.

Australian universities are going through a difficult period, and mathematical scientists (and our colleagues in the physical and chemical sciences) are having a harder time than most, as students abandon us. The newspapers (especially in New South Wales) have been full of the problems of the University of Newcastle, and as President I have already been called on twice this year to make submissions to reviews in other universities explaining the importance of maintaining a visible department of mathematics. At the same time, the Federal Government has been proposing changes to research funding, student unions, and industrial relations inside universities. We certainly live in interesting times! Arguably the Society should not be involved in the latter issues, but many members are concerned about aspects of the proposed Research Quality Framework—of real concern is the possibility that all scientific disciplines will be treated in the same way, and that the lower publication and citation rates in the mathematical sciences compared to our colleagues in other sciences may be used as evidence against us. The Society has made a submission drawing attention to the need to evaluate different disciplines in different ways. We should be very grateful to

Peter Hall, who did the great bulk of the work in preparing this submission. By the time this is printed, it should be accessible to anyone who wants to see it on the Society's web-site.

At the same time, there are reasons for optimism too. The Australian Research Council has agreed to fund a review of research in the Mathematical Sciences in the near future; it is likely that this will happen during the next year. While this report will focus on research, it is inevitable that the reduction in research output due to the erosion of the numbers of staff in university mathematical science departments in Australia will be noted, and so this will provide us with a real opportunity to plead our case for better support. In the United Kingdom, the decline in the mathematical sciences seems to be halting: on December 1 last year, the Secretary of State for Education and Skills, Charles Clarke, sought advice on how to change university funding to protect higher education courses of national strategic importance. The areas identified as being significant for the UK were Middle Eastern studies, Far Eastern studies, Eastern European studies, vocational courses of industrial significance (“e-skills”, for example), and science, technology, engineering and mathematics. There are times in this country where the tendency to emulate British trends can be very irritating, but other times when it is very welcome. We can aspire to obtain recognition of the importance of the mathematical sciences here in the same way.

There are other reasons to be hopeful. Those who have been involved in promoting careers in mathematics to high school students have reported that there appears to be

an increasing interest in mathematics at careers fairs and similar occasions. One factor in this is certainly the better material about careers for the mathematically trained that is now being circulated by AMSI and ICE-EM. But I'd like to hope that we are all becoming more aware of the need to promote our discipline, and becoming better at it.

Many of us know that a career in the mathematical sciences can be very rewarding (and a survey of careers in the USA a few years ago suggested that mathematicians actually enjoy more job satisfaction than all other professionals); if we tell the world about this, we may see student numbers rise and mathematics departments thrive again.