The sigma prize winners for 2010 have just been announced as:

**Outstanding Contributor: Dr Christie Marr (University of St Andrews)**

**Rising Star: Dr Ciarán Mac an Bhaird (National University of Ireland, Maynooth)**

In relation to these prizes mathematics and statistics support refers to activities which support and enhance students’ learning of these subjects (as they occur in many disciplines) in higher education. Support takes place in addition to traditional lectures, tutorials, etc.

There has been a huge growth in mathematics support activity over the last few years as universities have responded to the challenges presented by very diverse student cohorts. sigma is a HEFCE designated Centre for Excellence in Mathematics & Statistics Support, based at Loughborough and Coventry Universities.

The Outstanding Contributor prize recognises an individual who has made a significant contribution to mathematics support for at least 5 years and influenced others through promotion to a wide audience.

The Rising Star award is made to someone who has been working in mathematics support for up to three years and has been an effective champion of this work both within and outside their own institution.

The awards were presented at a ceremony held at the CETL-MSOR conference in Birmingham on 6/7 September 2010 (http://www.mathstore.ac.uk/?q=node/164).

**Dr Christie Marr**

From its inception, Christie Marr has been the driving force behind the Mathematics Support Centre at the University of St Andrews. Having proposed the idea to the University, in May 2005 she was appointed founding co-ordinator - and, at the time, sole tutor – of the centre, which is open to staff and students from across all subjects and all levels. Although it predominately targets undergraduates,
between 5 and 10% of visits each year come from staff and postgraduate students.

Since her arrival at St Andrews, Christie has worked hard to counter the erroneous perception that mathematics support is the prerogative of the weakest students, striving to demonstrate that it has a significant role to play in institutions with demanding entrance requirements. Her strong academic credentials, including her undergraduate degree, masters and doctorate (all Oxford University), her research background, and a long list of publications mean she is well placed to do this. Indeed, Christie’s academic credibility and commendations from lecturing staff have ensured that students attach no stigma to visiting the centre. In fact, attendance patterns indicate that students aiming to secure first class degrees are as likely to attend the centre as those struggling to pass their examinations.

Christie has taken a keen interest in raising the national profile of mathematics support, and was instrumental in the establishment of the Scottish Mathematics and Statistics Support Network (see http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/mathsnetwork/home/). As well as organising, hosting and presenting papers at conferences and workshops on mathematics support, she recently edited a volume: Responding to the Mathematics Problem: The Implementation of Institutional Support Mechanisms (MSOR Network, June 2010). The conference Christie organised that led to this publication – which addresses the logistics, implications and practicalities of establishing and sustaining institution-wide mathematics support provision – has been described as a ‘watershed’ moment in the field.

**Dr Ciarán Mac an Bhaird**

Ciarán Mac an Bhaird set up the Mathematics Support Centre (MSC) at the National University of Ireland Maynooth in September 2007. The drop-in centre promotes a friendly non-judgemental atmosphere where any undergraduate student can call in and ask for help with any aspect of mathematics. The MSC has quickly become one of the busiest centres in the UK and Ireland; in the last academic year alone there were 7262 visits from 599 individual students at the drop-in sessions. Ciarán is also a very active researcher in the area and this allows him to help determine best practice and measure the effectiveness of the support offered. Published research has shown that the MSC has a positive effect on student grades and on student retention; this is particularly true for ‘at-risk’ students. He is co-supervising a research Masters student who is investigating the reasons for attendance and non-attendance at the MSC.

To cater for the wide range of student ability Ciarán has also established group study sessions for final year students, a drop-in service for secondary schools, a peer mentoring group for pure mathematics students, a mentoring service for ‘at-risk’ students and weekly workshops to complement the MSC’s online Mathematics Proficiency and Foundation courses. Ciarán has also been awarded funding to develop reusable learning objects such as podcasts and screencasts.

Ciarán has advised teams from other third level institutions on setting up support centres, he has been appointed to several quality review teams for learning support services in other institutes and he is a founding and current committee member of the Irish Mathematics Support Network. The network is involved in several national collaborations. Ciarán has given numerous talks at conferences in Ireland, Europe and the US and in 2008 he was awarded a secondment with sigma and has worked on developing resources in the history of mathematics.

**Selection process**

Nominations were scrutinised against the criteria by a Panel consisting of Professors Tony Croft and Duncan Lawson (sigma Directors), Jan Tennant, Director of the Teaching Centre at Loughborough University, Professor John O’Donoghue (University of Limerick). The Panel individually assessed and ranked each application. The individual rankings were aggregated to provide a short list of overall winners in each category. Professor Madeleine Atkins, Vice Chancellor, Coventry University, chaired a final Award Panel to consider the shortlisted entries.

Further information can be obtained from sigma Assistant Director, Moira Petrie (m.g.petrie@lboro.ac.uk).