Let us begin with some old news: the Higher Education Academy (HEA) Mathematics, Statistics and Operational Research Network ceases to operate at the end of July 2012, with HEA support for teaching and learning developments being arranged in a different way. Thinking to the future, my reaction to this statement calls to mind a cartoon seen in childhood, of a chap in a car asking a local in the countryside how to get to the village. “Arr”, says the local, “if oi were ee, oi shouldn’t start from yur.” We are, though, where we are. The considerable funding cut imposed upon the Academy required a radical response, and was too big to be dealt with by fiddling with the margins.

There has been much discussion concerning the way in which the HEA has restructured itself in order to support continuation of both discipline level and other work. This is not the place to give a full description of the new structure, except to remind readers that in the period following the restructuring, the academy now has appointed a discipline lead for Maths, Stats and OR, in the person of Mary McAlinden. Indeed, my concern here is not to rake over old coals, but to consider one particular question. How can the mathematical sciences community help ensure that views from that community about what is needed are successfully communicated to the discipline lead? To do this it may be useful to reflect upon the advisory structure which has existed for the MSOR Network.

The MSOR Network Advisory Group has existed formally to advise the Network as to its activities and priorities on behalf of the MSOR community. There were and are, of course, other influences and stakeholders offering varying degrees of advice, but my view remains that without paying respect to the input of the discipline community, the mission to enhance teaching and learning in the discipline and to raise the status of teaching in HE will make little progress.

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The Advisory Group has been broad and diverse, aiming to represent the broad and diverse nature of the Mathematical Sciences, and therefore to ensure good quality advice. Formal bodies represented provide a plethora of acronyms, including (alphabetically) the EMS, HoDoMS, the IMA, the LMS, the NCETM, the ORS, the RSS and SEMTA. The Group has also sought to ensure voices have been heard from Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales as well as from England. Thus there have been voices from Mathematics pure and applied, both per se and as a ‘service’ to other disciplines, similarly from Statistics, both per se and as a ‘service’, and from Operational Research; HE mathematical sciences are represented through the learned societies but also through the heads of departments body; and representation both of industry through
SEMTA and school mathematics through NCETM make sure the interfaces both with industry and with schools and colleges are taken into account.

This Advisory Group formally ceases to exist at the end of July 2012. It has persisted during a period of a few months while the Network has used transitional HEA funding to maintain provision and to function in parallel with new HEA structures, but that period finishes at the end of July. During the transition period we have energetically stated what we think is important from current work. The discipline lead attended what will have been the last formal Advisory Group meeting, in December, as well as meeting with Departmental Network contacts. These provided useful opportunities both to restate established messages and to look to the future.

I pause here to repeat what I hope are established messages. The new lecturer induction course, and workshops for postgraduate tutors, are both much valued and respected, because they are Maths, Stats and OR specific and are taught by experts within the discipline. MSOR Connections is widely read and appreciated, and given its nature as a scholarly magazine is particularly appreciated in paper form. Facts and Formulae sheets remain popular. The annual MSOR Conference continues to be well attended and to give highly valued networking opportunities. All these features have been supported during the academic year 2011/12 using HEA transitional funding, and I am confident that the MSOR community remains highly supportive of their continuing with their essential features intact into the future.

So where does this leave us? It is a time to move forward and to learn. We in the MSOR community need to learn how best to communicate with the discipline lead and the HEA about the things we value. We must acknowledge that we are in a much more competitive situation than before, not only with each other within our discipline, but with other disciplines. We must respect and exploit both the specific nature and the breadth of MSOR and its importance in many areas of life. Finally we must continue to state what we value from what already exists, but also learn how to use the new structures and bidding mechanisms to maximum effect in the revamped academy to achieve funding not only for existing ideas, but also for new ideas and initiatives.

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