Reflections from a past Director (2000-8)

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It is a great pleasure to be invited to contribute to this the last issue of Connections produced by the MSOR Network. The Maths, Stats & OR Network has made important and significant contributions to the development of learning and teaching in higher education for well over a decade, firstly as a Subject Centre in the Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN) and more recently within the Higher Education Academy (HEA). Its forebears were the Computers in Teaching Initiative (CTI) and the UK Mathematics Courseware Consortium (MATHWISE), which helped develop the committed colleagues to form the basis of the MSOR Network, together with the Royal Statistical Society’s Centre for Statistical Education.

One of the great advantages of both LTSN and HEA was that it had as its principal objective to support Learning and Teaching in Mathematics, Statistics and Operational Research across the nations; in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales across all disciplines that undertook elements of their programmes in MSOR. Funding came from the four Higher Education Funding Councils while the Advisory Committee endeavoured to include representatives from each country alongside representatives from the major societies in the MSOR disciplines together with members from outside bodies and other Subject Centres, thus providing the broad range of views we were seeking. Originally it was intended for the Chair of the Advisory Committee to hold the position for two years, but twelve years on, we have had just three! The plan was for the Chair to rotate between appropriate representatives from the various mathematical and statistical professional and learned societies. The first chair was Robert Curnow from the Royal Statistical Society, followed by Chris Budd representing the London Mathematical Society and most recently Neil Challis from the Institute of Mathematics and its Applications. These highly committed individuals have gone well beyond the originally intended commitments, but the MSOR Network’s success owes much to their individual efforts and wise guidance over this period of our development.

The major driving forces\(^1\) behind the establishment of the MSOR Network were Pam Bishop (from CTI Mathematics in Birmingham), Adrian Bowman (from CTI Statistics in Glasgow) and Neville Davies (Centre for the RSS Centre for Statistical Education at Nottingham Trent, and now Plymouth). They helped with choosing the ‘brand name’ MSOR Network which would survive various reincarnations of the Subject Centres funding base. They also ensured every effort was made to reflect the breadth of

\(^1\)It is typical of the man that John Blake modestly omits his own name from this list. Many recognise that, from the very early days, he had the vision to see what might be possible and the energy to bring those possibilities to reality. The Editor.
the educational base was represented on the Advisory Committee and through a range of activities developed by the Network, seeking to involve as many higher education staff from a range of institutions. One only need look at participants at workshops, contributors to the publications of the Network and attendance at the Induction Course for New Lecturers and the Supporting Postgraduate Students who Teach to see how successful this objective has been. More details on these and others activities can be readily gleaned from the MSOR Network website.

Other activities developed by the Network include the now well established CETL-MSOR Conferences, ranking alongside the other major conferences such as the BAMC and BMC. Recently I looked at a poster advertising the 2006 Conference at Loughborough. One item of amusement is the appearance of the ‘IMA’ slightly off-centre on the poster, while the student on the left is Paul Wakeley. Paul wrote a memorable and influential article in Connections in defence of the blackboard [1]. This article was exploited by some institutions to preserve these valuable ‘pieces of furniture’ for re-installation in their rooms and lecture theatres on moving to a new building!

One aspect of publicising the MSOR Network is the wide range of formulae leaflets that are now available. At the very beginning of the Subject Centres, many Centres (including us!), would use ‘mouse mats’, ‘embroidered pens’ and other paraphernalia to promote our wares. While visiting CALTECH to attend an international conference, I visited their campus bookshop and noticed the large number of formulae sheets available to their students for a few cents. If one of the great institutions of the world encourage the use of formulae sheets, why not the MSOR Network? Thus began the now enormously popular Facts and Formulae leaflet, developed by Tony Croft, his colleagues at Loughborough and others. Well over 100,000 of the original Facts and Formulae leaflets have been produced for use in universities, schools and in several other countries. There is now a whole range of Facts and Formulae leaflets, not only destined for MSOR departments but other disciplines such as chemistry, medicine and computer science.

One of the early areas of concern, which still remains, is ‘parity of esteem between teaching and research’. It is pleasing to see that many institutions are making an effort to address this issue, with the opportunity for promotion to senior lecturer and professor being an available route in some institutions. It has been a very great pleasure for me to be able to provide advice to a number of institutions that have led to promotion of academic staff to these categories. It is also apparent that for those institutions that have policies where a serious effort is made to support the career paths of academic dedicated to learning and teaching often feature highly in student satisfaction tables.

On a personal level when I reflect back to my inaugural lecture at Birmingham in 1990, I mused at the end as to what my main contributions might be at Birmingham. There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that the contributions to the development of the MSOR Network is foremost as one of the activities that has given me the greatest pleasure in addition to the many friendships established through the MSOR Network.

Our discipline has many characters, but let me identify just one, the truly remarkable Cliff Beevers, with his many contributions to computer-aided learning but also his various guide-dogs. He has been the subject of a previous article in Connections by Robert Harding [2]. Cliff and I shared many interests beyond mathematical education, particularly the regular battles between England and Australia on the cricket and rugby fields (this later turned to golf especially after work at Birmingham on the technical laws of golf). There were many phone calls from Cliff, but the one I especially remember started with the opening gambit that he was again desperately disappointed on not being invited to open the batting for England (this was during the period when Australia were in some ascendency!). I also well remember with much pleasure the time when Cliff and guide-dog stayed in our home. Apart from Cliff, the pleasure came from the fine Scotch malt he had brought down from Scotland!

When embarking on this article there were many other colleagues that deserve to be mentioned for their outstanding contributions to the development of the MSOR Network and, to those not included, I apologise. Instead I have focussed on several less well-known features of the development of the Network, especially in the earlier period.

Finally, to everyone involved with the Network, thank you for the wonderful memories, and may you continue to provide leadership in learning and teaching in your respective institutions in the UK, and more widely on the international stage. Do not let our legacy disappear!

Perhaps I might finally conclude with the well-known quote from Charles Alfred Mercier:

“What we learn with pleasure we never forget”.

References