HoDoMS (Heads of Departments of Mathematical Sciences) held its annual conference for 2007 at the University of Birmingham Conference Park on 3-4 April 2007. This conference (attendance at which is not restricted to Heads of Department) aims to bring participants up to date with developments in all of the many areas which impact on mathematics departments in higher education institutions. As such, it gives a concentrated but comprehensive overview of key issues and provides an opportunity to question key players.

The most pressing issue for many university mathematicians at the moment is the coming Research Assessment Exercise: the conference opened with a question and answer session with Ken Brown and Bernard Silverman, chairs of the Pure Mathematics and Statistics sub-panels respectively. Their answers certainly clarified some points and gave valuable insights into the approach that the panels will take.

David Harman, the Mathematical Sciences Programme Manager for the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC), brought the audience up to date on EPSRC issues, including the implications for masters programmes of the move from Collaborative Training Accounts (CTA) to Knowledge Transfer Accounts (KTA). He mentioned the excellent “Engaging Maths”, an attractive booklet explaining why mathematics matters, recently launched at the House of Commons [1].

Sir David Wallace talked about the Isaac Newton Institute (INI) in Cambridge and the opportunities it offers to young researchers, including funding possibilities, and the efforts being made by the INI to build links with maths departments in universities. He also, as its Chair, provided an update on the Council for Mathematical Sciences (CMS), in particular, explaining its position on the vexed question of the implementation of the second GCSE in mathematics, and described the survey CMS is undertaking to gather information about the health of university maths departments.

The first day finished with a session led by Gwyneth Stallard, of the London Mathematical Society’s Women in Mathematics Committee, and Peter Main of the Institute of Physics, who presented a study about the position of women in physics departments. The ensuing discussion showed that this presentation aroused a lot of interest, and a strong view emerged that a code of practice on gender issues in mathematics departments would be desirable: HoDoMS will be pursuing this.

The second day began with Stephen Huggett of the European Mathematical Society talking about this organisation (and, to the particular interest of many in the audience, about related funding opportunities). The second session featured Michael Grove...
of the Maths, Stats & OR Network (MSOR Network), with his colleagues, who provided an update on the MSOR Network’s activities and particularly about the staff development activities it offers. Conference regulars always look forward to the presentation by the MSOR Network, which is a valuable reminder of the practical support available to enhance maths teaching in higher education, such as the module ‘Teaching Mathematics in HE’ developed by the Network.

Nick Doran of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) provided an update on developments at Key Stages 3 and 4 and on the new Advanced Diplomas for 16-19 year-olds, which it is hoped will provide an alternative route into higher education. The Engineering Diploma, in particular, will be of great interest to admissions tutors in mathematics. Jenny Baker, representing the Department for Education and Skills (DFES), spoke about the Department’s STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) agenda, which is further evidence of government recognition of the importance of mathematics.

The conference finished with a presentation by Helen Orr, Project Manager for the More Maths Grads project. This project, which had its origins at a previous HoDoMS conference, has brought together HoDoMS, the MSOR Network and the three mathematics professional bodies. Three pilot projects are now beginning, working with 20 schools and 5 FE colleges, but producing materials to be made available to all, which will examine how we can increase the supply of mathematics graduates who are so desperately needed in so many sectors of society.

The conference was, as always, congenial and informative. Great credit is due to the Chair of HoDoMS, Peter Giblin, and the Secretary, Andrew Osbaldestin, whose efforts made it run smoothly and effectively. Despite the surfeit of acronyms (something that seems to bedevil the maths community), it was a very rewarding 24 hours.

“Further information about HoDoMS, and material including presentations from the conference, can be found on the HoDoMS website at:
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References

1. “Engaging Maths” (2007) EPSRC booklet:

2. HoDoMS website: