

Report on the 2007 meeting of Newton Institute Correspondents

This year's meeting of Correspondents was held on Friday 22nd June 2007 at the Institute. It was attended by 33 Correspondents or their substitutes (30 from Universities plus 3 from other organisations), out of a possible 83 (62 plus 21 respectively): a list is attached. The Institute took the opportunity, as last year, to use the fact that some Universities' Correspondents were unable to attend to suggest to Heads of Department that the time might have come for a new appointment; this resulted subsequently in a handful of changes.

The agenda was as follows:

- 12.30 Lunch
- 13.30 Peter Kuchment (current organiser): *Analysis on Graphs and its Applications*
- 14.30 Sir David Wallace and Robert Hunt: presentations on future programmes at the Institute and current initiatives
- 15.30 Tea
- 16.00 Open Discussion: "an opportunity for a wide-ranging exchange of views"
- 17.00 Bjorn Engquist (current organiser): *Homogenisation: Analysis and Computation*
- 18.00 Wine Reception

The presentations by the Director and Deputy Director covered the future plans of the Institute and the programmes currently in preparation, emphasising the wealth of information available on the Institute's website. In particular, attention was drawn to the possibility (encouraged by the Institute) of inviting our overseas participants to give seminars elsewhere in the UK: full lists of invited participants are available online many months in advance.

The Director presented various items of statistical information (scientific areas of participants; age, gender and geographical distribution) and outlined the financial and administrative support offered both to participants and to programme organisers. Mention was made of the application to EPSRC for funding from 2008 to 2014, which was ongoing at the time of the meeting (and was subsequently successful).

The governance arrangements of the Institute were explained, and the role of the Scientific Steering Committee [SSC] clarified. The Director explained that while the SSC operates mainly in responsive mode, it also has a role in stimulating programme proposals in strategic areas: current areas of interest include environmental science, operational research, and mathematical chemistry. At present there is a healthy stream of unsolicited new proposals.

A table was circulated (available from the Institute on request) showing, for each UK University, both the number of Junior Members and the number of recent programme participants. This showed wide variation between institutions: it was clear that at particular Universities there was scope for the Institute's activities to be more widely advertised.

The discussion was then opened to the floor. Dr O'Donnell of Anglia Ruskin University explained that financial pressures had led to the imminent closure of the mathematics department there, and he would be writing to the press and Government about it. Other Correspondents agreed that the situation was bleak in some parts of the country. In the ensuing discussion there was worry that mathematical components are being removed even from degree subjects that require high levels of mathematical competency, such as engineering.

The Director discussed his ongoing series of visits to Universities around the UK, of which he had completed 16 at the time of the meeting with more to come. Various issues had arisen as common "themes" during these visits.

- *Criteria for programmes.* Common questions included:
 - Whether the Institute favours a particular split between UK and non-UK participants; would, for instance, only 30% international be frowned upon?

The Director explained that it is important to get the balance right programme by programme, but that EPSRC's only requirement is for a minimum of 20% UK participation by spend. There are no other pre-conceptions.

- Whether the Institute has any quota for pure mathematical topics. The answer is no, either positively or negatively: quality of proposals is more important.
- *Junior Membership scheme.* There is strong support for this across the UK and a desire to see the scheme expanded, which the Director is pursuing actively. (EPSRC will not fund the scheme as they believe that DTAs should be used for that purpose.) There have also been suggestions for automatic rights of visit for other groups, such as EPSRC Advanced Fellows, Royal Society URFs, etc.
- *Dissemination of information.* A common theme during the Director's visits has been how the Institute could better reach individuals (particularly early career researchers). Could the information sent to Correspondents be improved? Should local email distribution lists be encouraged? Should multiple Correspondents be supported in a single institution? It was agreed that information should be sent directly to Research Services Divisions in Universities, especially if funding from the Institute can be given as a research grant instead of through subsistence payments. Targeting learned societies and/or colloquium organisers might be a good way of reaching researchers in other disciplines (biology, etc.), and the Institute will follow this up.
- *Programme format.* Should the Institute have some shorter programmes? The Director confirmed that one-month-long programmes are very welcome, and that if demand is present then more could be arranged than is currently the case. As a new initiative, typically 2-week-long "follow-up programmes" are being scheduled a few years after a 4- or 6-month programme. "Scoping meetings" (2- or 3-day-long events during which a small group develop ideas for a full programme proposal) are also possible. It is important not to impinge on ICMS's area of expertise.
- *Graduate training.* Could the Institute link with national training collaborations? Certainly, and a forthcoming programme is exploring this. Programme organisers are now very strongly encouraged to begin their programme with a training workshop intended mainly for PhD students and early-career researchers.
- *Cambridge University.* A common criticism is that Cambridge researchers, despite being only a few minutes' walk away from the Institute, do not participate actively enough in Institute programmes. The Director is introducing changes to address this issue, although no researcher from Cambridge receives any financial support when they participate.
- *Measures of success.* The Institute is required by EPSRC to measure "success". There was discussion about how targets are determined and their suitability. At present most data is collected through participants' questionnaires, both on departure and 2 years later.

The Deputy Director explained current initiatives regarding "seminars on the web". At present only audio is available, together with scans of the speaker's slides or presentation. Recent experiments with video capture had proved very encouraging and suitable equipment will shortly be installed. It is hoped that video will be available on the Institute's website later this year, and Correspondents will be kept informed. This could be particularly valuable for broadcasting training events. Further phases, including web-casting, are planned for the future.

The Director thanked all Correspondents warmly for their contribution to the work of the Institute. He would welcome the opportunity to speak informally to any Correspondent either in person or by telephone.

Robert Hunt, July 2007

Attendees

University Correspondents

C Athorne	Glasgow
T Brzezinski	Wales, Swansea
AD Burbanks	Portsmouth
BL Burrows	Staffordshire
C Christopher	Plymouth
PA Clarkson	Kent
N Dorey	Cambridge
SW Ellacott	Brighton
JW Elliott	Hull
T Etchells	Liverpool John Moores (substitute for PJG Lisboa)
R Halbut	Loughborough (substitute for AP Veselov)
K Henderson	West of England
G Hornig	Dundee
M McCartney	Ulster
AJ McKane	Manchester (Physics)
KCH Mackenzie	Sheffield
F Mezzadri	Bristol
P O'Donnell	Anglia Ruskin
A Pillay	Leeds
T Pirashvili	Leicester (substitute for F Neumann)
R Plymen	Manchester (Mathematics, substitute for M Prest)
A Pratoussevitch	Liverpool (substitute for PJ Giblin)
D Quinney	Keele (substitute for JJ Healey)
M Reid	Warwick
A Richard	Heriot-Watt (substitute for S Foss)
A Sevastyanov	Aberdeen
I Smolyarenko	Brunel (substitute for J Kaplunov)
J Stoyanov	Newcastle
J Thuburn	Exeter (substitute for AM Soward)
C Tran	St Andrews (substitute for D Dritschel)

Correspondents from other Institutions

CM Bishop	Microsoft Research
R Hibbs	OR Society
H Tewkesbury	Smith Institute