

HoDoMS

Heads of Departments of Mathematical Sciences in the UK

Chair's report to the AGM, 3 April 2007

The Committee of HoDoMS meets 3 times a year, in September, in January and at the Conference in April. In between these meetings members of the Committee attend many events and meetings of other bodies, keep a close watch on official consultations to which responses are required, and, particularly, watch out for danger signs from government on funding, regulation of school mathematics, and so on. This results in much correspondence among Committee members; when necessary, the whole HoD community is consulted and kept informed of developments. HoDoMS works closely with the Council for the Mathematical Sciences, and the three constituent learned societies, the LMS, IMA and RSS, together with the OR Society, have representatives on our Committee. I should particularly like to thank Peter Cooper and Martin Smith for their very real help during my time as Chair, in matters connected with the CMS.

The annual Conference of HoDoMS is of course a major event in our calendar. We try to bring together major figures from the various bodies which have influence on education and research. It says something for the stature of HoDoMS as an organization that a good number of these very busy people are willing to come and talk to us.

Bid to HEFCE for the initiative to increase the number of mathematics graduates. This bid, with its strong emphasis on Widening Participation, was finally approved in 2006, with a smallish reduction in funding from £3.8M to £3.3M over three years. It will be officially launched on 23 April 2007. I remind you that this bid was born at the conference two years ago, with Duncan Lawson as Chair; he has also been instrumental in carrying the proposal through to acceptance.

RAE Post-2008 In common with other organizations, HoDoMS responded to the DfES consultation on the future of the RAE. We argued that a purely metrics-based assessment was not appropriate for mathematical sciences. Apparently the arguments made by us and others were successful for mathematics and statistics have been exempted from the government's plans for a fully metrics-based RAE post 2008.

Bologna and the future of Integrated Master's Degrees HoDoMS was represented by myself on the working party of the CMS. A report was produced in October 2006 and this has been widely circulated. My impression is that the government is still not taking the implications of Bologna seriously, because the bottom line is the lack of funding for second cycle (master's) qualifications. Some universities are also not taking the matter seriously enough: at the very least all integrated master's qualifications should have 120 UK Credits worth of M level material, spread over years 3 and 4.

QCA, DfES and the new mathematics GCSEs HoDoMS has taken alarm at the government's plans for replacing GCSE mathematics with two examinations, one of them at a basic level and the other for more motivated students. I have been in correspondence with the Chief Executive of the QCA, Dr Ken Boston, setting out the worries of the mathematical sciences community and asking that HoDoMS, as a major stakeholder, should be represented in discussions on the future of the examinations. At this conference we have an opportunity to find out from Nick Doran of the QCA what is the latest thinking on this important issue.

Health of mathematics departments Noting the lack of hard information on whether mathematical sciences departments are 'doing well' or 'doing badly', HoDoMS, in collaboration with the LMS, has launched an annual survey in the form of a questionnaire which goes out in January. Analysis of the first year's returns will take place over Easter at the LMS but with funding provided by HoDoMS.

Cuts in Research Council funding The news of £68M cuts in research council funding came quite recently. At first it was feared that this would be compounded by £100M lost through the loss of end of year flexibility. The latter threat does appear to have gone, and in the budget the Chancellor did promise additional funding for science in the years ahead, but the £68M cut remains, apparently caused by overspending of the DTI in other areas. I have written to a number of influential people about this. It does seem strange that the cut has received so little publicity.

Revision of the QAA Benchmark for MSOR The benchmark statement is five years old and the QAA has set in motion a review. HoDoMS consulted the community about the level of review which is needed, and the unanimous response which I was able to relay to the QAA was that 'minimal revision' was required. The original benchmark was drawn up by a committee under the chairmanship of Chris Robson, and the mathematical sciences community has reason to be very grateful to him and to the committee for producing such a sane and reasonable document. The fact that the benchmark is an official document of the QAA gives us a robust defence against those who would like to force students to pass every module in order to graduate, not to mention those who think that an honours degree should reach the frontiers of knowledge. (However, any possible breaches of these and other defences need to be monitored very carefully.)

I am representing HoDoMS on this QAA committee and minor changes are already being finalised. There is likely to be an attempt to formulate an integrated master's MSOR benchmark over the next year.

I have found my six years on the HoDoMS committee as an elected member very interesting and rewarding, as well as being pretty hard work at times. I record here my thanks to the other committee members, in particular to Andy Osbaldestin who as secretary has carried a significant part of the burden. I now begin two years as a sort of senior citizen on the committee, referred to as the Past Chair. The Committee of HoDoMS will continue to address the burning issues confronting heads of departments and I look forward to being a small part of this important work.

Peter Giblin, 2 April 2007.