

Minutes of the Committee of Professors of Statistics in the UK and Ireland

Annual Meeting held on 24th May, 2004 at University College London.

Present:

Ashby, Bailey, Balding, Barnett, Bingham, Bowman (chair), Brown, Buckland, Clancy, Copas, Evans, Fearn, Green, Haigh, Hand, Isham, Kent, Krzanowski, Micklewright, Nason, Penrose, Renshaw, Silverman, Subba Rao, Taylor, Titterington, Tong, Weber, Wooff, Wynn

1. Welcome

The chairman welcomed members to the meeting and a number of apologies for absence were reported.

2. Appointment of minutes secretary

Guy Nason was appointed to take minutes.

3. Minutes of 2003 meeting

These were approved.

4. Matters arising

None.

5. Publications

- (a) Members were reminded of the existence of the postgraduate fliers for issuing to prospective postgraduate students. The main aim is to direct students to the web site at www.copstat.ac.uk where departmental information on postgraduate opportunities is available.
- (b) A warm vote of thanks was given to Alan Mayer for all his work in maintaining the Academic Directory. This extremely useful publication appears in both paper and web form. The continued demand for a paper version was confirmed.
- (c) Members were reminded of the existence of the COPS website which contains links to a variety of documents. Comments on the content were welcomed.

6. Domestic matters

- (a) The membership list for COPS had been distributed with the papers for the meeting. It was requested that these are checked and amendments sent to Adrian Bowman (AWB) for updating.
- (b) The chair reported that some departments were being chased for their annual questionnaire returns. The information available from the questionnaire is very helpful when presenting cases to EPSRC etc. and members were encouraged to keep returning the data. AWB undertook to report on this year's exercise once the data were more complete.

- (c) A vote of thanks was extended to Julian Stander for his work in looking after the COPS accounts. The move of postgraduate publicity material to the web had reduced COPS costs considerably and there are currently no financial issues of concern.
- (d) Doug Altman had agreed to represent COPS on an MRC working party on Experimental Design organised by the Centre for Best Practice in Animal Research. Members were directed to a report on the progress of the working party, circulated with the meeting papers.

7. Research and postgraduate matters

- (a) *The Isaac Newton Institute.*

Sir John Kingman was welcomed to speak as the Director of the INI. The nature, structure and timetable of programmes were outlined. More proposals for programmes in Statistics were strongly encouraged. The issues associated with setting up proposals were discussed, including the perception that statisticians tend to find it more difficult to spend long periods of time working elsewhere. The need to plan three years in advance was also emphasised. Ensuing discussion included the nature of publications produced, the size and shape of proposals and financial issues. Sir John was thanked for his presentation, which concluded with the clear message that good proposals from statisticians would be greatly welcomed.

- (b) *EPSRC issues*

AWB welcomed Annette Bramley and Anne Farrow to the meeting. Annette is the Mathematics Programme Manager while Anne has some particular responsibilities for Statistics within the Mathematics Programme team. AWB reminded the meeting that there had been follow-up from the EPSRC-related discussion at the 2003 COPS meeting. This included a meeting with Annette on grant application success rates and a further meeting with David Leech to discuss the potentially adverse impact on Statistics of the CTA scheme for funding M.Sc. courses. EPSRC had subsequently issued an open letter of guidance intended to support the position of Statistics M.Sc.'s. Current information on the progress of negotiations at individual institutions suggested that considerable concerns about the impact on Statistics remained and these were aired during discussion. Departments were requested to send a summary of the current position to AWB, who would collate this information and alert EPSRC to continuing difficulties.

- (c) *The International Review of Mathematics.*

Bernard Silverman was thanked for his work on the Steering Committee of the IRM and invited to comment on the process and the outcome. Bernard gave a very helpful summary of the IRM and the ensuing report. Statistics and probability feature highly, with ringing endorsements of their world-leading roles but there are serious concerns about recruitment and the implications for future leadership in the subject. There is currently a serious dearth of mid-career statisticians. Undergraduate numbers in mathematics were actually holding up well compared to trends on continental Europe but recruitment in Statistics

at Ph.D. level and beyond is a serious difficulty. The report proposed ring-fenced fellowship funding to assist. The difficulties in winning EPSRC grants in Statistics had also been highlighted in the report and a separate funding stream for Statistics had been proposed to address this.

Considerable discussion followed. The fact that the report had highlighted the very considerable strengths of the subject, but also made clear the dangers ahead, was greatly welcomed. It was pointed out that the problems being faced were the result of success, with statisticians in great demand at all levels, both inside and outside universities.

Annette and Anne were given the opportunity to comment on the report and the mechanisms for taking matters forward. Annette explained that EPSRC was currently engaging in consultation with the mathematics community and that an action plan would be drawn up. The idea of EPSRC initial funding for lectureships to support critical mass for research groups in one or two centres was outlined. However, COPS members felt that the sums of money involved could be used much more productively in other ways. Similar concerns were also expressed about the existing critical mass funding for large research centres.

Annette and Anne left the meeting but, before they did so, they were warmly thanked for their contributions to the discussion and more generally for their hard work within the Mathematics Programme and their willingness to discuss any issues of concern to the community.

Valerie Isham is a member of EPSRC's Mathematics Strategic Advisory Team and she reported on the wide variety of topics that have been raised in that forum. This includes concerns about poor grant success rates in Statistics, recruitment to the subject, the adverse impact of the CTA scheme, ideas on fellowship funding, more flexible forms of Ph.D. training and issues of public engagement. Peter Green explained that the RSS was planning a response to the IRM report. He highlighted an apparent perception in the minds of some outside the Statistics community that there was a divide between theory and applications in the subject. The problem with this perception is that UK strength is then attributed to the latter, which is sometimes regarded by others simply as technology transfer. A tripartite divide into "pure theory", "generic (or core) methodology" and "applications" is more helpful, particularly in highlighting UK strength in the middle of these. He also pointed out that, as sponsors of the IRM and the principal research funder in several areas, EPSRC plays a key role in the IRM debate but that it is also important to engage with other funding bodies and employers. Peter summarised the proposals on grant funding, fellowships, etc. which had been put forward and invited further contributions by e-mail.

In terms of immediate post-IRM action, there was a clear view that the creation of a pool of funding for competitive allocation of further research studentships was the most effective immediate strategy for addressing issues of recruitment. Valerie Isham undertook to put this proposal to Annette in consultation with Adrian Bowman as COPS chair.

(d) *RAE 2008.*

The COPS submission on panel structure and membership had been sent off and the final decisions on these issues were awaited. Information on how to nominate panel members was also expected soon and this would be circulated to COPS for discussion on how to proceed. The timescale is expected to be quite short. In discussion at the meeting, the importance of the panel being constructed to allow coverage of all areas of the subject was highlighted. There was a general view that interdisciplinary issues were handled in a broadly satisfactory manner in RAE 2001.

(e) *Statistics at the University of Birmingham.*

Adrian Bowman reported on a summary of the situation at the University of Birmingham, supplied by Tony Lawrance in his absence. Developments within the School of Mathematics and Statistics have led to the number of statisticians reducing currently to one. Tony saw this disastrous situation as a warning to other Statistics groups.

8. The Post-14 Mathematics Inquiry

Richard Browne of the QCA was welcomed by the meeting. Richard gave a very helpful overview of the curriculum issues associated with Adrian Smith's report and its very big potential impact on Mathematics teaching in schools. During the discussion, concern was expressed on the status of Statistics within the proposals, with its removal from the Mathematics curriculum leaving it potentially marginalised. (The RSS has issued a response to the Inquiry report which develops this issue.) It also emerged that the Government has not, and indeed may not in the future, formally respond to the report. This left some uncertainty over its status.

9. Teaching matters

Vic Barnett led a discussion on several items under this heading.

- (a) The ILT and the LTSN Subject Centres are to be subsumed into a new Higher Education Academy. The broad structure of this was outlined.
- (b) A course for statistics lecturers has been developed by the RSS Centre for Statistical Education, under LTSN auspices. It is planned to seek accreditation in various forms. The course could form a highly suitable alternative to some of the induction training which is compulsory in universities for new lecturers.
- (c) The LTSN Centre currently offers a variety of one day courses on specific teaching issues under the Daybreak Programme and details of these were described.

10. AOB

- (a) Adrian Bowman reported that his term of office as COPS chair was due to finish this year and that an approach to a possible successor had been made. The outcome would be announced by e-mail once these discussions had been completed. Peter Green proposed a vote of thanks to Adrian for his work as chair.
- (b) The Department at UCL was thanked for its provision of a venue for the meeting.