

Minutes of the COPS meeting held at UCL on 12 Sept 2014

1. Welcome from Michael Goldstein

Present: Dave Applebaum, John Aston, Steve Buckland, Damian Clancy, Steve Coad, Peter Diggle, Tom Fearn, Steven Gilmour, Mark Girolami, Michael Goldstein, Kevin McConway, Phil O'Neill, Natalie Shlomo, Chris Skinner, Charles Taylor, Alastair Young

Apologies: Adrian Bowman, Caitlin Buck, Bob Gilchrist, Rob Henderson, Valerie Isham, Wilf Kendall, Denise Lievesley, James Norris, Julian Stander, Andy Woods

Minutes secretary: Steve Buckland

3. Minutes of 2013 meeting.

4. No matters arising.

5. Domestic matters.

COPS spent £177 last year. There is no need to raise any funds through subscriptions.

The questionnaire survey this year suggests that healthy groups are growing, while small groups are suffering. MG is considering how to do an analysis of the returns next year. He thanks Camila Caiado for considerable technical help in carrying out the survey.

It was important to have some turnover of members on the COPS executive. Andy has indicated that he was prepared to stand down, and a replacement is needed. The executive also needs to select a new Chair to replace Michael in the next few months.

6. The COPS website suffered some technical issues with the transfer to jiscmail. The committee needs to address how the website develops at some point. The Directory of Academic Statisticians gets updated on request, but there is no routine for updating, so that entries for many groups do not get updated.

7. EPSRC Mathematics Programme

Chris White noted that EPSRC was in year 4 of a 5-year flat cash settlement. Scoping and consultation for a delivery plan will take place over the next 18 months.

He noted several initiatives: new Centres for Doctoral Training; fellowships in statistics and applied probability; the next Heads of Department day in 2015; the people pipeline project; mathematics/Living With Environmental Change networks (4 networks, £2m awarded); review of the taxonomy of mathematical sciences funding (e.g. is it appropriate for statistics to be grouped with applied probability?); mathematical science infrastructure; complexity science; EPSRC challenge themes.

Chris also reported on the Review Day held in Birmingham. 30 attended; there is a draft report which has not yet been released. The International Review of Mathematics identified statistics and

applied probability as a growth area. There were still questions of the health of the area, and to what extent it should grow. Chris noted the impact of increased investment in fellowships. Feedback on training was that it is over-centralised in the Centres for Doctoral Training. There is a need to support departments with EPSRC funding but without such a centre. Big data was noted as an opportunity but also a risk – statistics can become spread too thinly across disciplines. Chris noted the need to be more aware of other research council initiatives. Science and Innovation awards are coming to an end – what next? Chris also noted the peer review culture in statistics, where it was common for reviewers to be rather unsupportive even of very strong research proposals. The result is that the discipline loses out to areas where colleagues tend to be more supportive.

Next steps: applied probability and statistics portfolio – do we have the right balance? Core stats vs applied. Opportunities across EPSRC and other RCs. Fellowships for established career stage in applied probability and statistics will be closed soon, while maintaining fellowships at early career and postdoc levels. Next comprehensive spending review: advocacy and impact are important to persuade government. EPSRC role in The Alan Turing Institute: joint venture partner. There is a need to change the peer review culture.

The discussion that followed included the following issues.

Applied probability and statistics is a wide area compared with say algebra, but there is a possibility that it might be treated on a par with that area for funding; the field does not get the weight it merits.

An important role of statistical research is to provide the methodological developments to address an applied need. The structure of the research councils fails to recognise this; a proposal to EPSRC must stress methodological novelty, with no emphasis on application, while proposals to other research councils are the reverse.

There is an ongoing trend towards the big statistics groups securing more and more of the share of EPSRC funding, while small groups, however strong, disappear.

Chris noted that EPSRC is starting to appreciate that they don't provide all stats funding – they need to understand better what is being funded through other means.

8. Peter Diggle, in his role of RSS president, asked 'how can RSS best serve the academic community?' He noted the fragility of statistics groups at universities, exacerbated by REF/RAE and EPSRC policies. He also highlighted the rise of data science, which is both a threat and an opportunity. He asked whether training of the next generation of academic statisticians should involve conversion from other disciplines through postgraduate training, postgraduate research, or postdoctoral research. He referred to the withdrawal of support from masters programmes.

Peter stated that EPSRC focussed on statistical mathematics at the cost of statistical science, and that there was excessive concentration on PhD funding. MRC and ESRC both award substantial funding in statistics. MRC fund many more statistics fellows than do EPSRC, and ESRC PhD funding is open to international students.

RSS conference shows a slow but steady rise in attendance, but Peter noted the tension between specialist and generalist. The format of the conference is currently being reviewed by Jen Rodgers at LSHTM.

Peter commented that almost all RSS read papers pass through the research section; other sections largely ignore read papers.

In the discussion that followed, it was noted that the Society does not receive a breadth of research papers to consider for read papers. This perhaps reflects expectations of researchers: they are unlikely to submit a paper that doesn't fit with the apparent narrow focus of such papers. It was also suggested that the conference no longer serves the needs of academic researchers.

Peter encouraged COPS to lobby him on issues important to the academic community.

9. Report of the Academic Affairs Advisory Group (Kevin McConway)

Kevin reported that AAAG needs at least one new member. He also noted that RSS's Policy and Research Manager, Olivia Varley-Winters, provides some admin support.

Activities in the past year include:

Advice to RSS representatives on Council for the Mathematical Sciences. Adrian Smith now chairs CMS. He has pressed for more discussions on education, and discussions with EPSRC on many of the issues listed in section 7.

The AAAG had input to the EPSRC statistics and applied probability review day.

AAAG have discussed challenges for research funding and issues of big data and data science.

AAAG ran two sessions at the RSS conference in 2013.

AAAG has also discussed internal RSS issues, and has had input to consultations on vision for science and research funding and on capital investment in big data, research metrics, data analytic skills in higher education, review of the ESRC DTC network, a national strategy for quantitative skills, revision of the QAA MSOR benchmark statement, mathematical and digital science, and Healthcare Technologies Grand Challenge strategies.

10. Research and postgraduate matters.

Wilf Kendall submitted an APTS report. 152 students registered for one or more workshops in 2013/14. 54 registered for all 4 weeks, 43 actually attended all four. 132 were first-year students in statistics or probability, and 39 of these were EPSRC funded.

Simon Wood and Peter Diggle are stepping down, with Finn Lindgren and Ingrid van Keilgom taking their place. Wilf noted their thanks to Simon and Peter.

A committee is considering the future leadership of APTS from 2016/17 onwards.

It was noted that EPSRC funding ends in two years, but APTS is expected to continue.

The London grouping LTTC gets 20-30 students on statistics streams a year.

The Scottish centre SMSTC continues with the same format, providing a broad-based training. Adrian Bowman noted the complementarity with APTS.

Items 11 & 12 covered above

13 AOB. None