

Letter from 20 academic participants in the
EPSRC Pure Mathematics Workshop (Bath, 19-20 January 2012)
to Philippa Hemmings (Mathematics Theme Leader)

2nd February 2012

Dear Philippa,

We understand that it is part of the job of the Mathematics Theme to implement the agenda set by EPSRC Council. So we participated in the Pure Mathematics Workshop in Bath last month with the hope of offering advice from the viewpoint of researchers in the subject.

Although we had no idea of what was in store, having seen neither a programme of aims and objectives, nor a list of who had been invited or why, we joined in what we hoped would be a pragmatic attempt to address the concerns of the Pure Mathematics community in respect of the EPSRC-wide agenda, particularly with regard to *Shaping Capability* and the role of *National Importance* in the peer review process.

In the end the event was a disappointment and you and your colleagues may agree with us that an opportunity was missed. Here are some of the reasons from our perspective.

- Not being told in advance what was wanted from the workshop was a serious problem from the outset. Consequently, a sense of partnership and responsibility in exploring the issues was lost and some of the discussions were aimless.
- It was difficult to understand why the IRMS landscape documents, and the IRMS report itself, which were authoritative, thoroughly considered documents commissioned and accepted by EPSRC and currently relevant, seemed to be ignored.
- The deep level of specialism and granularity in pure mathematics, which distinguishes it from other sciences, the absence of experts in some important subject areas, and the fact that we did not know which colleagues it would be useful to consult in advance, meant that those invited could not be representative of UK Pure Mathematics.
- Significant issues to do with *Shaping Capability and Developing Leaders*, such as the funding of postgraduates and postdoctoral training, were not considered with the weight they deserved.

Nonetheless, we continue to hope that we can assist the Mathematics Theme in pursuit of long-term benefits for mathematics and remain keen to engage with the EPSRC in finding constructive ways to implement policies without damaging core research activity across the UK. For example we could give you arguments that could be used in discussions within EPSRC, making the case that mathematics is especially unsuited to a directed approach, making suggestions that could mitigate damage to mathematics of general EPSRC-wide policies, and emphasizing that the mechanisms that EPSRC should be

concentrating on should leave the subject to develop naturally, thereby in particular maximizing its contributions to society.

If such engagement is to include workshops such as that in Bath, these should have a clear purpose, which is stated in advance, and allow time for proper preparation, so that time in the meeting itself can be used productively. Only then can an account of what was discussed and any conclusions reached have due weight. However the workshop in Bath suggests that the Mathematics Theme badly needs a different kind of interface with the mathematics research community, that enables advice to be provided to EPSRC on an ongoing basis by mathematicians trusted by EPSRC and the community alike, who can help overcome the technical and cultural barriers to understanding.

With best wishes,

From all 20 academics who attended the Pure Mathematics Workshop in Bath on 20 January 2010

(John Ball, Jacek Brodzki, Martin Bridson, Ken Brown, Dorothy Buck, David Calderbank, Tony Carbery, Mihalis Dafermos, Fred Diamond, Alexander Gorodnik, John Greenlees, Nigel Hitchin, Peter Keevash, Chris Parker, John Parker, Anand Pillay, Caroline Series, Shaun Stevens, John Toland, Sanju Velani)