

## So what are the benefits of attending the MA Conference?

### Some thoughts and feedback from a first time attendee

By Mel Muldowney (East Midlands Branch) and  
Dave Pountney (Branches Committee Chairman)

For the last few years, MA Branches Committee has been trying to encourage more Branch members to consider attending MA Conference. Everyone on the committee has attended MA Conference (and indeed other mathematics conferences) in the past and all know full well the advantages and benefits that can accrue for delegates involved in mathematics and mathematics education. It was felt that these benefits may not always be clear to those new to mathematics education or those who have never been to an MA Conference, and that ways should be sought to encourage such first time participation.

So, in October 2014, Branches Committee decided to offer a sponsorship of a free, residential place at the 2015 MA Conference held in April at Keele University – worth about £375 to the successful applicant. Branches were invited to nominate a Branch member who wanted to attend MA Conference and I) was (or would be) a current MA member at the time of the Conference, ii) had not previously attended an MA Conference, iii) would be prepared to write a brief report about their experiences at Conference. Nominees were asked to indicate what their expectations were about attending a Conference and how that might impact on their professional role. This latter item was used to decide in the selection process in the event of numerous nominees.

Mel Muldowney of the East Midlands Branch was the successful nominee and duly attended the 2015 MA Conference. Mel Muldowney is currently Associate Subject Leader and on the Extended Leadership Team at Alcester Academy as well as one of the founders of Just Maths. Mel previously worked at Trinity High School, Redditch (previously designated as a “National Challenge School”) and as second in Department helped lead the department to achieve results nearly 20% above target – a contributory factor in the school being awarded ‘Most Improved School in England (Jan 13)’ and twice being shortlisted for TES Secondary School of the Year (2013 & 2014). With this background in mathematics teaching, Branches Committee felt that Mel was an ideal candidate to provide feedback on her Conference experiences and the benefits to her teaching role. Her unexpurgated report follows.

### Conference experience feedback: Mel’s report.

‘Subject associations and where they “fit” in the day to day grind of teaching is something that I’ve been thinking about since I had the pleasure of attending the Mathematical Association’s 2015 Conference in April. At the back end of last year I was asked if I would consider being put forward to attend the conference on behalf of the **East Midlands Branch** of the MA by the marvellous Rob Smith, the Branch Liaison Officer and member of the Branches Committee, and after the application process I was chosen to attend as a guest.

It is all too easy to leave events like this, enthusiastic and motivated, only to get back into the classroom on Monday morning and find that all your good intentions fizzle out.

Prior to the three-day event (dare I say 3 days is too long to take out of our valuable Easter Holidays?) I chose my work- shop sessions from a vast selection of choices – there were some difficult decisions to make as I would have liked to attend so many more, and the way in which some of the workshops were scheduled against each other meant that I missed so much I feel I would have benefitted further from.

This was my first experience of the MA Conference and, I must say, I did leave the event feeling excited

and energized but not for the reasons that I had expected.

I've previously attended several subject conferences that have a much more "at the coal-face" teaching focus but on the morning of arrival, having spoken to a few others in attendance it became clear that this wasn't like anything I'd attended before in terms of its target audience not being exclusively made up of teachers. As a consequence I spent part of the day wondering that maybe I just wasn't "mathsey" enough ... by that I mean that I don't "LOVE" Maths as much as the others attending evidently did. It all felt a little academic and detached from what goes on in my classroom and I needed to remind myself that it wasn't just a "Maths teacher" event.

The three day event began with an opening lecture from Mike Askew who spoke about "what counts in a balanced mathematical education?" He spoke about the intended, enacted and attained curriculum and I sat up and really listened when very early in his speech he said "The only way to understand teaching and learning is to have been in teaching and learning" ... he is so very right!

This was followed on the Wednesday afternoon with two sessions. The first was with Alison Clark-Wilson who spoke about the development and use of Cornerstone Maths resources (<http://www.cornerstonemaths.co.uk/>) which is intended for use by pupils in Key Stage 3 (based on the new National Curriculum released in July 2013) with a view to looking at how to integrate IT into mathematics lessons to present key mathematical ideas using dynamic representations and simulations. I know several people taking part in this project and the feedback I've had has been promising.

The second session of the day was with several members of the Royal Society discussing their vision for the next 20 years of science and mathematics education in the UK (<https://royalsociety.org/education/policy/vision/>). This session was set up "circle-time" style and was very informal and interactive. No-one would argue against many of the objectives of their "Vision": Maths education continuing until the age of 18 and teachers having a high professional status, along with a strong supply of science and mathematics specialists. However I did feel that maybe the vision was based on "blue skies" and all a little detached from reality in lots of tough schools out there.

Thursday morning saw Ruth Merttens take to the stage and she was simply inspiring. A bundle of energy, who "pulls no punches" and is obviously very passionate and knowledgeable about education. Equally "ballsey" was the Presidential Lecture from Lynne McClure that day – I mean that in the context it was a brave move. In an attempt to look at why the number of people attending the conference was declining, Lynne was extremely open and honest and the session involved an appeal to the attendees of the conference for ideas about how to encourage more people to attend.

Other sessions that I went to that day included: Philipp Legner who showcased his amazing website ([www.mathigon.com](http://www.mathigon.com)). This was a particular favourite amongst the Maths teaching community on Twitter – I'm not embarrassed to say that I was a little in awe at having met the man who had developed it. Steve Lyon's session involved him demonstrating some of the functionality that is now available on the National STEM Centre's eLibrary ([www.nationalstemcentre.org.uk/elibrary](http://www.nationalstemcentre.org.uk/elibrary)), which I'll definitely be using.

During the session by Peter M. Neumann I had a "eureka" moment. I realised how events such as this conference gave me the opportunity to meet people like Peter. The most important thing however came from us working through his "Words and their Wonderful Ways" masterclass that he delivers to year 10 students. Having worked with "challenging" cohorts I couldn't imagine some of my previous students accessing the *whole* activity, but the fact that they were making inroads could be massively aspirational to those "top end" students and I finished the day "buzzing" – sometimes teaching is more than teaching "content", it is also about showing students where the Maths they are doing today could ultimately lead them.

Friday morning saw me attending the Jane Jones session about "The New National Curriculum: challenges and opportunities – a view from Ofsted". Jane used the opportunity to do some, as she called

it “myth –busting” and clarified that Ofsted have **not** been saying they judge progress **just by** looking at students’ books. It was a really interesting session in which elements of the new NC were explored and I particularly enjoyed the summary of the emerging findings from subject survey visits.

My final session with Darren Macey was definitely the one I enjoyed the most. His session was interactive and engaging - he gave an overview of the major changes in Maths education over the last 100 years or so, and we spent time looking at past assessment questions going back, as far as the mid 1800’s. A session that was especially pertinent given the current swathes of changes that are taking place within schools.

The closing presentation from Alex Bellos was brilliant too. He came across as intelligent, humorous and obviously has a passion for Maths. He spoke about the origins of his book: Alex through the Looking-Glass/The Grapes of Math and how he polled 44,000 people to find the world’s favourite number. I even got my well-thumbed copy of his previous book signed.

I’ve always known about the existence of subject associations but until recently have never felt the urge to become a member. There was no sense of urgency to join and I suppose there was also an element that they weren’t for teachers “like me”. Having attended the conference my view has changed slightly (not entirely though as I do think they need to change and adapt) but I am excited about next year’s conference which has the title “Inspiring Teachers”, which I hope suggests more of a focus on ideas that I can deploy in my teaching, rather than inspiring me personally.

Overall, a fantastic experience, but the biggest thing that comes out of these events is meeting people in real life and this event was no different in that respect. I met people from all walks of life and without exception everybody was amazingly welcoming and friendly.

The most important factor for me was, once again experiencing that “wow! Maths is just awesome!” feeling that I hope I inspire in my students ... at times it’s easy to forget just how “awesome” our subject is.

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## **Conclusion**

Clearly the MA Conference has had an ‘awesome’ impact on Mel as Branches Committee anticipated it would. It may be hard to convince some that the benefits of attending conference are as much to do with who you meet and make contacts with, as well as learning about new trends in mathematics and/or mathematics education.

Branches Committee has felt that this experiment has been ‘money well spent’ and very much hope to repeat this sponsorship for 2016 MA Conference in a similar way. Members who have never been to MA Conference before and may be interested should contact their Branch Liaison officer in the first instance. Details of the sponsorship scheme will be agreed by Branches Committee at their meeting in October and advertised to all Branch liaison officers in November 2015.

*Dave Pountney (Branches Committee Chair)*