

Wendelin WERNER: Fields Medal 2006, professor at Université Paris-Sud 11, Orsay and Ecole Normale Supérieure.

As a newly elected member-at-large of the IMU executive committee, I have been asked to write a few editorial words in this IMU newsletter, and I am honoured to have the opportunity to express the following few thoughts to this audience.

Our time as mathematicians is spent teaching (for most of us) or tutoring, in personal research, including reviewing colleagues' papers as referees or editors, and working for the community (university administration, editorial work, committees etc.). Most of the latter can properly be done only by mathematicians themselves, since it is essential in such activity to really understand what is going on. We all need to participate in a significant way in this kind of work if we want our community to function on a sound basis.

Reading in some depth our colleagues' papers is an essential way to fuel our own research. Personally I often found it more efficient than attending talks or conferences. Many of us remember that when we grew up as scientists, preparing our Master or PhD theses, the effort of fighting our way through a tough paper (the author of which we often met for the first time only some years later) turned out later to be one of the key moments of our early scientific careers.

Tension between our academic world and its funding bodies is certainly not new. But in the past few years a more and more widespread "rational" managerial approach to academic science, based on short-term «efficiency», «impact» or «delivery», has also tended to drag us away from the rigor that is at the cores of our scientific identities. Nowadays funding bodies function with a multiplicity of evaluation committees (I was once asked to sit on a committee that evaluates evaluation agencies!); we have to write (and then read and evaluate) grant-proposals with pre-formatted, imposed, superficial frames that seem so badly adapted to mathematics.

This trend is complemented by the serious lack of recognition by our own academic world of the difficult, time-consuming, anonymous refereeing of papers (editors can testify how difficult it sometimes is to find a good referee for a paper). Is there any longer enough time, will and incentive to spend carefully reading other mathematicians' works?

In general, I believe that it is important that our community stays firm and united across geographic and thematic (applied vs. non-applied) borders, to defend the specific aspects of our discipline that we cherish. Acting together we have a hope of persuading technocratic or political structures (that claim they only want to help us to improve and that they are of good will) to change how they treat mathematics and mathematicians and to avoid setting up the numerous, rigid frames and rules that significantly harm the freedom, originality and creativity which have been characteristic of so many of the great mathematical ideas in the past, including those that have had lasting positive "impact" inside and outside of our discipline.

Wendelin Werner
Member of IMU Executive Committee

Other articles on this topic of the same author:

<http://blogs.mediapart.fr/blog/wendelin-werner/280308/la-recherche-en-quete-d-efficacite>

<http://images.math.cnrs.fr/Piloter-la-politique-scientifique.html>