

Mike Daly, President, 'The future direction of the Society'

21st Oct 2020

Mike presented for discussion, some data from the recent Strategy2020 review carried out by the Society. The data concerned two main subjects, the Society membership and science programme. This focus had come from external concerns expressed about the relevance of the GSL science programme, diversity of the membership, the website and digital image of the Society, and recognition of significant financial pressure.

Membership

Membership has grown steadily from 1807, there had been acceleration since discovery of oil and gas in the N Sea and the merger with the Institution of Geologists in 1990. However, whilst a detailed membership analysis showed that the Society supports around 12,000 members, it also showed it has a significant churn of members. As a consequence of this insight, more executive team effort is going into member retention and attraction.

In terms of diversity, about 20% of the membership are women, but this percentage reduces dramatically with age, so there are very few women members in their 50s or older. Equally, the membership is lacking ethnic diversity. In an attempt to build a Society more representative of the country's Earth Science community, the membership has voted in a Council with good affiliation variety, academic, industry, government, and gender and ethnicity diversity.

About 40% of the membership is employed in engineering or construction, 20% in oil and gas, and 15% in the academic area. Some 20% of members are based overseas.

Looking further ahead, the data also shows that the university intake of Geoscience undergraduates has been decreasing about 10% per annum. This decline has not been felt in all universities and comes with a strong suggestion that the course content is a significant issue for an increasingly social and environmentally aware generation.

Science

The future direction of the Earth Sciences was examined through an analysis involving Government, industry and academia; science papers published; UK/RI funding; and public interest.

The trends identified became particularly clear through the Research Council themes that focussed on multidisciplinary issues such as the energy transition, climate change, machine learning (which has expanded greatly over the past 2 yrs), planetary science (which is often collaborative), geohazards, major engineering or construction projects (e.g. HS2, Crossrail, water pipelines). The important question arising from this, was how well the Society's existing and long held structures fit with these multidisciplinary themes and how that may be improved.

To address this changing science focus Council has supported the creation of five key societal themes . The Society is currently advertising for Theme Leaders to champion these multidisciplinary themes.

Finally, Strategy2020 was summarised in four actions for the GSL Executive to follow:

- 1.Advance multidisciplinary Earth science to inform societal and global issues
- 2.Support professional development, careers and education in the Earth Sciences
- 3.Be an inclusive and collaborative home for Earth Science in the UK and internationally
- 4.Become a dynamic organisation with strong digital identity.

DISCUSSION

Q. It is really good to see that a number of problems that had become apparent (particularly to younger members over the past 10 years), were actually being addressed.

A. Yes, with the excellent, data driven analysis we now have, we can actually start truly identifying our problems and fixing them.

Q. The recent establishment of a palaeoclimatology specialist group was noted, and it clearly related to some of the new themes.

A. This had been noted and its new climate policy statement is eagerly awaited by many in the Society. Carrie Lear and her collaborators have done a great job and the position will be rolled out in 2021 I believe.

Q. Should we consider where the Society is located?

A. All five of the Burlington House Courtyard Societies are feeling the pressure of escalating rents. For the GSL the choice is becoming clear. We need to agree a different lease structure with the Government to be sustainable in BH. This has been the case since we signed the new lease in 2006, it just gets worse with time as rents escalate. Looking forward there would be many benefits of leaving BH, and much sadness.

It was the Government who moved the original scientific societies out of Somerset House and into New Burlington House, so perhaps the pertinent question is will the Government move any of the Societies to a different location now, in view of their escalating rent? The Government's London commercial property will likely never recover from the work and behavioural changes that covid-19 is driving. This together with the heralded moves of government departments to the mountains green of northern England, gives the MHLCG some new financial problems, and perhaps other opportunities for us.

Q. While it was very interesting to see all the work that has been done, did the study look at the question of open access (OA) publications? A lot of our publications are from the oil industry and so there are two key threats: loss of income from specialist publications and decline in membership.

A. We did not specifically address OA. The GSL publishing house has done a great job in preparing for the OA world, not least by launching its own online, OA journal Earth Science, Systems, and Society (ES³). They are currently interviewing for the Editor in Chief. Your other points are well made.

Q. How about the other BH societies?

A. Some are rich in assets but very low in membership and therefore are cash poor; others are significantly bigger than us but are also exposed to unsustainable, increasing rents and publication income decline. For sure we are not alone in this issue, but each of the five societies has a different relationship to it that makes tight collaboration difficult.

Q. The question of how the Society served its members in the regions was raised.

A. Surprisingly I believe the regions do not spend the money they have access to. We are looking into that relationship. I'd like to see it as much closer and linked through our new themes which will focus us on many local issues.

The meeting closed with traditional Toasts to the Queen and to the Society.

The next meeting would be a 'Show and Tell' event on Wed 2nd Dec.

John Bennett