

Letter from the President – April 2016

This letter is my opportunity to congratulate the following members, whose research works have been internationally recognised for having global significance and impact:

Andrew J. Wiles who has been awarded the Abel Prize. His citation reads; “ The Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters has decided to award the Abel Prize for 2016 to Sir Andrew J. Wiles (62), University of Oxford, for his stunning proof of Fermat’s Last Theorem by way of the modularity conjecture for semistable elliptic curves, opening a new era in number theory.” The award will be made in Oslo on May 24. See <http://www.abelprize.no/c53673/seksjon/vis.html?tid=53719>

Tim Bliss and **Graham Collingridge**, have won this years ‘Brain Prize’ (€1M), which is considered as a ‘Nobel Prize for neuroscience’: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-35686351> and <http://www.thebrainprize.org/>. The awards will be made in Copenhagen on July 1. The collective citation reads: “The research by Professors Bliss and Collingridge has focused on a brain mechanism known as ‘Long-Term Potentiation’ (LTP), which underpins the life-long plasticity of the brain. Their discoveries have revolutionised our understanding of how memories are formed, retained and lost.

The neuroscientists have independently and collectively shown how the connections – the synapses - between brain cells in the hippocampus (a structure vital for the formation of new memories) can be strengthened through repeated stimulation. LTP is so-called because it can persist indefinitely. Their work has revealed some of the basic mechanisms behind the phenomenon and has shown that LTP is the basis for our ability to learn and remember.

There may be other members from our humanities and social sciences disciplines who have received similar internationally prestigious prizes and awards – and as a scientist, I would like to know about these.

As part of the Academies’ new ‘consortium for science advice project’: I recently participated in a meeting with the other consortium Presidents and with the members of the new High Level Group for science advice (HLG), European Commissioner Moedas and key members of his staff, including the Director General for Research and Innovation – Dr Robert Jan Smits (*see the photo*). I am pleased to report that we are on track to submit the finalised project proposal later this month. Already we have responded to a HLG/Commission request to provide expert names on studies concerning CO₂ emissions from light vehicles and on Cybersecurity. These have been useful testers for our internal structures and the Board will now consider how to put into place a robust internal process that we can use to identify rapidly, potential experts and to formulate our own ideas on topics for science advisory reports and statements. I am pleased also to announce that Ms Louise Edwards has been recruited at the Cardiff Hub, to manage our day-to-day policy advice work within the project.

I was pleased to have been able to take part in the first meeting of our Hub’s staff and Hub Academic Directors and the team from our Information Centre in Graz, at the Senate House HQ in London. This was a stimulating day, that I am sure will result in further improvements to our member service and to the overall visibility and impact of the AE.

Finally a heartfelt request: please do try to come along to the AGM and the annual conference of the AE that will take place in Cardiff 27 – 29 June. The programme includes; the Erasmus Lecture to be given by Professor Martin Rees, Astronomer Royal, cosmologist and former President of the Royal Society, and some very high level debates and lectures, including a number from new members elected in 2015. This will be a stimulating conference and we will be honoured by your attendance. All information can be found via our home page (www.ae-info.org)

Sierd Cloetingh, Utrecht, April 2016