

Our maths exodus

By education writer
MIAWLING LAM

AUSTRALIA will be forced to recruit thousands of foreign maths teachers to make up for a shortage of qualified graduates.

The proportion of Year 12 students studying advanced maths has plunged nearly seven per cent in 13 years, according to the latest national figures.

The Australian Mathematical Society's president, Professor Nalini Joshi, said the declining student interest in maths would jeopardise Australia's competitiveness in the finance and defence fields and lead to corpor-

ations outsourcing maths expertise to the US and UK.

"We'll become reliant on other countries to do the logical and financial analysis of our budgetary situation, our forecasts, our banking operations and our trading markets," she said.

"It will mean people will no longer be educated in a way that they can achieve their own understanding of statistics.

"The actual analytical skills are what we'll be missing out on."

Demand for mathematicians surged by 52 per cent between 1998 and 2005 and is expected to rise a further 33 per cent by 2013.

To combat the ongoing de-

cline, the federal Government has introduced several initiatives including increased funding for universities that offer more places to maths students and reducing student tertiary tuition fees by up to \$10,000.

But neither measure had worked, Professor Joshi said.

"A lot of people postpone their HECS debt until they're in the workforce so I don't think people who are 18 think about how much debt they'll have when they're 25," she said.

Instead, she said strategies such as encouraging school careers counsellors to promote the study of mathematics, increasing

starting salaries of maths graduates and placing maths specialists in primary schools would reverse the worrying trend.

The geeky image of mathematicians and their reputation as "uncool" are also discouraging students from taking maths.

Social analyst David Chalke said many students simply chose easier options.

"We celebrate geeks, but it doesn't mean we want to be one, because there are more fun things to do that aren't as much hard work," he said.

"A PhD on Michael Jackson's glove is a whole lot easier than further computations of pi."



Gun and son: Axemen Peter and Jack Windley

A family on the cutting edge

CHAMPION axeman Peter Windley and his 15-year-old son Jack are busy training for the double-handed sawing competition at the Sydney Royal Easter Show this year.

Mr Windley is a fourth-generation woodchopper who has many titles under his belt and has competed in the finals of the world championships.

The 40-year-old from Nowra said he was proud to be competing with eldest son Jack whose keen ability at such a young age has impressed him.

"Jack's good at sawing and he's on the fringe of making the NSW team," he said.

"We'll be competing together at the show in three events."



Although size and strength are important, a woodchopping champion must have perfect technique, which takes a few years to develop, says Mr Windley, whose youngest son, 11-year-old Noah, has been competing at events for 12 months.

"He's too young for the Sydney Show this year," Mr Windley said, "but he's taking this time to get the confidence up and learn technique."

The family practise each week.

Johnnie be very good.



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