

Should people be Paid to Do Research in Mathematics?

Most mathematicians will admit that there is a sense of achievement in having made a mathematical discovery, no matter how small. This emotion along with the desire to gain the respect of other mathematicians are the inner motivating factors for doing mathematical research. A more materialistic motive for doing research is the fact having a number of papers published lessens the likelihood that one will be unemployed for long. Thus research mathematics shares this motivation with many other occupations: if you're good at it, you'll feel good about it and you'll get a good job out of it. It does not follow from this personal motivation that working as a research mathematician is necessarily a good thing.

Mathematics is an important tool in most of natural science and engineering. Clearly one would expect mathematicians to be paid for their services in the same way as laboratory technicians and bricklayers are. But there is a difference between applying the results we know and trying to find out new results. The question begs itself: do we need to know any more mathematics — can't we make do with what we have?

There is no reason to suppose that mankind will perish without further mathematical research. This does not mean that some future mathematical discovery might not be useful; nor does it deny that a mathematician who has done some "pure" research will usually be a better applied and teaching mathematician.

However, given that technology has outstripped man's needs, if not her desires, research mathematics is becoming a luxury good. Its benefits to mankind in general are increasingly marginal and we face the question: are we justified in paying mathematicians to do research and attend conferences when over half the world's adults are illiterate?

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Dr. Martin J. Newell (1910–1985)

Seán Tobin

The signature Máirtín O Tuúthail appears prominently on the very fine silver salver which was presented to President Éamon deValera, to mark his Golden Jubilee as Chancellor of the National University of Ireland, in December 1971. The salver is now on display in the Presidential Room of the National Museum—and it must have been very agreeable to Éamon de Valera, who maintained a lifelong interest in mathematics, to have on his memorial salver the signatures of two mathematicians (the other being that of Dr. Donal McCarthy, President of U.C.C.) as pro-vice-chancellors of the University. Dr. Newell's signature is firm and very clear, and this fits well with salient characteristics of the man himself: clarity of expression and firmness of decision, two qualities which became especially significant during his tenure of the Presidency of University College Galway, from 1960 to 1975, when the course of university development was charted for many years to come.

Martin J. Newell was born and bred in the heart of Galway, where his family lived in Shop Street, one of the old central streets which still preserve the outlines of the mediaeval City. He was educated there in St. Joseph's College and in 1926 he entered University College Galway, taking first places in the County Council and University Entrance Scholarships. A brilliant career as a student was crowned with the award in 1930 of the M.Sc. Degree in Mathematical Science (with first-class honours), and the N.U.I. Travelling Studentship. This brought him to Cambridge for three years in St. John's College, where he studied for the Mathematical Tripos.

In 1933 he was appointed to the staff of St. Michael's College in Listowel, and in 1935 he returned to Galway as Lecturer in Mathematics (through Irish), in succession to Eoghan McKenna who had become Professor of Mathematical Physics. Incidentally his own successor in Listowel was James Callagy B.A., they had been fellow-students at U.C.G., where they shared an enthusiasm for geometry.

In 1950 Martin J. Newell was appointed a member of the Governing Board of the School of Theoretical Physics at D.I.A.S., and he continued in that capacity until 1965. In 1952 he was awarded the degree D.Sc. by the N.U.I.