



---

**Media release**

7 June 2010

**For immediate release**

## **How to Talk Maths in Public**

A group of mathematicians is hitting the streets of Manchester this week in a bid to win over shoppers and passers-by, combining the seemingly disparate worlds of mathematics and busking.

The event is part of the first ever UK conference on how academic mathematicians can communicate their work to the wider public. The conference, *How to Talk Maths in Public: a conference on public engagement* will be held at the University of Manchester on 8 and 9 June. It will be attended by over 90 mathematicians from academe, industry, schools and FE colleges hoping to improve their skills at communicating their work.

Professor Chris Budd, from the University of Bath, co-chair of the organising committee, explained, "Maths affects all of our lives in many different ways and can be a lot of fun - but not everyone appreciates this. This conference will challenge mathematicians to communicate this maths message. At the same time, the need for professional engagement with the public in mathematics has never been greater. Economically, the need for more mathematically trained people is growing, there are massive shortages of trained mathematics teachers and many people do believe standards in mathematics at GCSE and A-level are dropping."

The conference will include how-to sessions from leading communicators of mathematics, including: Marcus du Sautoy, Professor of the Public Understanding of Science at the University of Oxford; Ian Stewart, Emeritus

Professor of Mathematics at the University of Warwick, a prolific writer and one-time collaborator with science-fiction author Terry Pratchett; and Simon Singh, a writer and journalist with a strong interest in mathematics.

Delegates will consider questions such as “*Can a respectable mathematician engage with the public?*” and “*How much maths is too much?*” The second day of the conference will feature their very own Maths X Factor talent competition – appropriately called the *e<sup>x</sup> factor* – in which the hopeful mathematicians will show off their skills in writing, presenting, being interviewed and public speaking.

Some of the attendees will try their hand at maths busking, which is a new performance art which draws on the techniques used by buskers to captivate an audience and apply these same ‘busking sensibilities’ to mathematics communication. It was developed by Sara Santos, Clothworkers’ Fellow at the Royal Institution of Great Britain and Matt Parker, a maths stand-up comedian based at Queen Mary, University of London.

Dr Santos explained, “Buskers are met with the same uninterested public that mathematicians are all too familiar with. They have to capture and contain their audience from otherwise indifferent members of the public who happen to walk past, and as such buskers have developed a huge range of techniques and approaches to draw-in and engage a crowd. So the main focus of Maths Busking is to develop engaging and non-threatening mathematics routines that will capture the audience because they are innately entertaining and the mathematical content does not alienate people with any level of mathematical background.”

Sara and Matt, together with maths agony uncle Steve Humble aka Dr Maths, have now trained over 60 maths buskers in the UK.

## Notes for Editors

1. **How to talk maths in public** was organised by the Institute of the Institute of Mathematics and its Applications in conjunction with the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council and the University of Manchester's School of Mathematics and Manchester Institute for Mathematical Sciences.  
Details of the conference are at [www.ima.org.uk/Conferences/public\\_engagement/index.html](http://www.ima.org.uk/Conferences/public_engagement/index.html)
2. The **Institute of Mathematics and its Applications** is the learned and professional society for mathematics. It promotes mathematics research, education and careers, and the use of mathematics in business, industry and commerce. Amongst its activities the IMA produces academic journals, organises conferences, and engages with government. Founded in 1964, the Institute has 5,000 members. Forty percent of members are employed in education (schools through to universities), and the other 60% work in commercial, industrial and governmental organisations. In 1990 the Institute was incorporated by Royal Charter and was subsequently granted the right to award Chartered Mathematician, Chartered Scientist and Chartered Mathematics Teacher designations. The IMA is a charity registered with the Charity Commissioners registered number: 1017777. [www.ima.org.uk](http://www.ima.org.uk)
3. The **University of Manchester - School of Mathematics / MIMS** is one of the largest integrated departments of mathematical sciences in the UK ( with over 80 academic staff, 1300 students and covers the entire breadth of the subject, including pure and applied mathematics, probability and statistics. It has an international reputation for its research, with almost 60% of its activity rated internationally excellent (of which 20% was classified as world leading) in the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) 2008. Further information on the School and its specific research interests can be found at [www.maths.manchester.ac.uk](http://www.maths.manchester.ac.uk)
4. The **Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council's** Public Engagement programme can be found at [www.epsrc.ac.uk/funding/grants/pe/ppe/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.epsrc.ac.uk/funding/grants/pe/ppe/Pages/default.aspx)
5. To get a flavour of **Maths Busking** see [www.mathsbusking.com](http://www.mathsbusking.com) or visit the Maths Busking Group on Facebook.
6. Contacts:

**Caroline Davis, London Mathematical Society - IMA Mathematics Promotion Unit**

Phone: 07941 795 513

E-mail: [Caroline.Davis@lms.ac.uk](mailto:Caroline.Davis@lms.ac.uk)

**Steve Humble, Maths Busker and aka Dr Maths**

Phone: 07787 588 568

E-mail: [drmaths@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:drmaths@hotmail.co.uk)

[www.ima.org.uk/Education/DrMaths/DrMaths.htm](http://www.ima.org.uk/Education/DrMaths/DrMaths.htm)

**Jon Keighren, Head of Media Relations, University of Manchester**

Phone: 0161 275 8384

Email: [jon.keighren@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:jon.keighren@manchester.ac.uk)