

Back to Bangladesh

Professor Christina Sommerville
Dean, Faculty of Natural Sciences

I was welcomed back to BAU wholeheartedly after 25 years and I am very grateful to the British Council for sponsoring my return visit in order to celebrate the 25 years of collaboration between BAU and the Institute of Aquaculture.

I went to BAU carrying the most warm and sincere good wishes from friends and colleagues in Stirling.

The collaboration began with my first visit to BAU 25 years ago and, although I have not been as frequent a visitor as some of my Stirling colleagues, my first visit acted as a “springboard” from which all subsequent activity came about. Many of my Stirling colleagues were envious of my visit to the celebrations and would have loved to join the gathering but, owing to teaching and other duties, were unable to make the trip. Many, too many to mention, sent their greetings and contributed to the video, which was enjoyed greatly.

That first visit, 25 years ago, was at the request of Professor Aminul Haque, who was then Dean of the Faculty of Fisheries and I was very pleased to meet him again as he was a guest of honour at the gathering. He had been motivated to develop the faculty and his motivation stemmed from a deep concern for the welfare of his students and his belief that they should get the very best from the Faculty that he could offer. Even in those days, faculty places were very competitive and attracted some of the best students in the country.

Although I spent much of my original visit giving lectures, I was able to make observations and recommendations to the British Council to indicate how the Faculty could be supported. I categorised the areas requiring development under the broad headings

- Staffing
- Research Facilities
- Communications
- Contact with the commercial world

The British Council then looked to see what programmes were available to develop these areas. Collaboration was slow to start because it coincided with Mrs Thatcher’s reduction of the ODA’s budget. Initially there were PhD studentships for staff training; Professor Roberts visited in 1987 and Malcolm Beveridge’s project funded by ODA was 1988-1990. There was some collaboration in 1988-1989 for the worldwide investigation of EUS, the ulcerative disease syndrome, which remains a problem in Bangladesh. The BAFRU unit was set up

in Stirling around 1990 and resulted in large numbers of visitors for short term training courses. During this time, new carp ponds were specially built at Howietown near Stirling and groups of students went out in all kinds of weather to do fieldwork. The BAFRU resource base was moved to Bangladesh in 1995.

The next major project was the DFID (then ODA) funded BAU-Stirling Link Project 1993-1996. During this project, Dr. Rod Wootten co-ordinated many exchange visits designed to strengthen the teaching and research capability of the Faculty. The BSc was restructured with the help of Prof. Lindsay Ross, the curriculum was revised in a number of subjects and PhD training of staff also took place. This was a very active period of collaboration, involving many staff from BAU and IoA. An important feature of this project was the improvement in the research facilities. The IoA laboratory superintendent, Ian MacRae helped design and fit new research laboratories for disease, environment and nutrition to suit the needs of the research staff. I was given a tour of the laboratories during my 2004 visit, as were the other guests at the gathering, and these represented a major change from to laboratories I had worked in 25 years ago. This was followed by the SUFER project 1998 -2004. The aim of the SUFER project was to influence the kind of research carried out in BAU by funding highly competitive research projects which were to improve the use of aquatic resources to benefit poor people more directly – I saw a series of posters presenting this work which also showed that important collaborations had been forged in order to carry out the research.

Whilst I was there, many people asked me what changes I saw and, of course, there were many- the new road from Dhaka to Mymensingh, the number of cars and hotels in Dhaka, the emerging grey hairs on my former students! But it is more interesting to look at my recommendations and to see how things had developed.

In terms of research facilities, twenty five years ago not a great deal of research was being carried out; staff were put off by the lack of sometimes the most basic equipment. For example, microscopes were there but in an unusable condition. What do I see now? -large, modern, well-equipped laboratories- which are being used! I know that people are short of some things, technology changes so rapidly, but this is the case for all scientists everywhere, with only a very few exceptions. There are however, opportunities to build these into research grant proposals. There are also opportunities to develop collaborations to share expensive equipment. This kind of collaboration is being encouraged in Scotland and in the European Union generally.

What of communications? 25 years ago, I saw people working independently, having

little contact into other researchers in their field; research was being duplicated both within Bangladesh and outside it. I saw the same projects in more than one institution. Research results were not readily discussed and disseminated and there was little scientific interaction. Now I could see confident scientists and teachers visiting conferences, workshops and international meetings. Several new journals have sprung up within the country, with 3 from the Fisheries faculty.

As for contact with the commercial world, this is very important as industry creates wealth and can benefit greatly from research. The immediate application of research findings is very satisfying for researchers and keeping in touch with real problems keeps the research relevant. Ultimately, the producer will have profits, some of which they can be encouraged to invest in more research, I see this happening now in BAU and I think it will grow as trust builds up between the commercial world and academia .

Finally, in terms of staffing, the most important resource of all, what has changed? Twenty five years ago, Prof. Haque was short staffed and there was a shortage of people to fill the vacancies. He was training his own staff and then appointing them as MSc graduates. There was, most importantly, a shortage of senior staff. Many were on staff training doing PhD degrees overseas. Sometimes the research they did for a PhD in other countries had little relevance to the needs of Bangladesh. Worse still, some of the Faculty’s brightest staff were lost to other countries as they failed to return and resume their Faculty post; BAU has some very eminent alumni in other countries! What staff remained were overloaded with teaching duties and uninspired to do research. As a result, there were few postgraduate research students. What did I see on my return visit? I saw a Faculty with a full complement of well-trained, enthusiastic staff, with new MSc graduates queuing up for the next possible vacancy. I saw good PhD graduates returning to Mymensingh. I saw active, enthusiastic researchers carrying out projects which directly benefit farmers and therefore the economy; the SUFER projects looking to benefit the livelihoods of poor people; research which informs government policy.

There is a “buzz” about the place, an excitement about the research which is infectious to Masters and PhD students. The Faculty now has a healthy 25 students currently doing PhDs. I saw confident scientists who are more outward looking to the wider scientific community, ready to present their work and benefit from interaction with international scientists. There is still some way to go but the Faculty is in good heart. It should set its targets high for the next 25 years. Hopefully Stirling will go forward with it as partners.