

Key Comparisons

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Editorial

The signing of the Mutual Recognition Arrangement (MRA) in Paris on 14 October 1999 was a landmark event in the field of metrology. One of the consequences of the MRA that will have a significant impact on *Metrologia* is the programme of *key comparisons* to be carried out with increasing frequency over the next few years. In support of the MRA, *Metrologia* has undertaken to publish these reports, a decision that while perfectly in line with the mission of *Metrologia*, raises several issues, particularly related to refereeing.

The section in *Metrologia* already set aside for international comparisons will henceforth be designated *Key and International Comparisons*. Some thought was given to the possibility of publishing all such comparisons in a special issue each year, but it was felt, among other factors, that the delays involved would be untenable. It is clear, however, that such reports are quite different in character from typical research articles, which are of course subject to our independent peer-review process. Since comparisons follow well-defined formats and are normally approved by a panel of experts in the field, the question has been raised as to whether the review process should be applied in these cases. The view at *Metrologia* is that some kind of review is still desirable. For one thing, it is significant for authors, particularly young researchers, to be able to cite a paper on their list of refereed publications. Furthermore, even a report vetted by experts can sometimes be improved in terms of its coherence and presentation when critically examined by an external observer not immersed in the details.

The criteria adopted for the analysis of data reported in a comparison are usually reached by consensus of the participants or of the consultative

committee (CC) that has initiated it, often only after extensive debate. In the review process a problem can arise, however, when the views of the referee on certain issues conflict with those espoused by the participants or by the CC. Given the effort expended by the latter in reaching a consensus, it seems only reasonable that their position should prevail. In this issue, the paper by R. Thalmann serves as an example where the reviewer's criticisms of some aspects of the analysis (for example the use of weighted mean as opposed to median, the treatment of outliers) were waived in favour of the author's approach. While both reviewer and author presented strong, well-reasoned arguments, it was felt that the collective agreement reached by the participants had to be respected. Such an editorial decision does not necessarily negate the review process; from time to time an author's defence of criticism in a standard research paper is sustained over the contrary opinion of the referee. I might add that in the above-mentioned case the referee's constructive criticism on other aspects of the report was gratefully acknowledged by the author.

On the other hand, reviews are hardly necessary for the short summaries of international comparisons that are occasionally published in *Metrologia*. These reports, which contain useful, but typically concise information, will be reviewed at the discretion of the Editor.

The sections on *Short Communications* (usually three pages or less), *Letters to the Editor* and *International Reports* will remain unchanged. The latter will continue to feature such items as *News from the BIPM* and other topics of interest to the metrological community.

P. W. Martin
April 2000