

An important role to play



A visit to SEE HQ at Buntingford in October gave me the opportunity to hear about the Society's Measurement Uncertainty Working Group which has been doing an incredible amount of work since its formation almost eight years ago.

Initially set up under the chairmanship of Ralph Harris of TUV Assessment Services, who is still a member of the group, its objective then was to produce a guide to assist non-technical persons within the testing industry to understand calibration and its associated uncertainties of temperature measurement. Not a simple task, but one that would seem at first consideration to be moderately achievable. However, it turned out to be far from the case as Harris plus other members of the working group soon found out. Initially planned to have the guide ready within a year, in fact it took four years to produce the document, the delay being the complexity of the subject from beginning to end. By this time, though, Harris had to step down as chairman to be replaced by Peter Vincent and Stephanie Bell of NPL who then moved the group to consider humidity. If ever there was a minefield, this was it.

The next report was to be divided into two parts, one dealing with temperature and the other with humidity, but what followed were lengthy debates on humidity uncertainty, how to calculate it and how to explain it. There were also problems on how to strike a balance between a theoretically accurate approach and a practical one which led to many a lively debate. Before too long it had become clear that trying to modify the temperature guide and fitting humidity into its structure was becoming impossible. It

was getting to a point where even the "experts" were finding it difficult to understand the revised guide which led to a major rethink about the whole thing. However, as temperature uncertainties cannot be separated from humidity uncertainties, it was decided to produce a combined guide for either temperature or both temperature and humidity.

Very much involved at this stage was Bob Pragnell, perhaps one of the leading experts on humidity in the country, who worked long hours wrestling with the topic. A draft was finally produced in October 2001 at the SEE seminar on Measurement Uncertainty with the final version being circulated in May last year. It was at the SEE annual dinner this year that Vincent was presented with the SEE award for his work on guiding the document to completion while Pragnell, as project leader of IEC WG19 of TC104, has taken the document forward as the basis for the international standard IEC60068-3-11.

The whole point of telling this story, apart from honouring all those who put so much time and effort into the project, is that it encapsulates for me just what the SEE stands for. It is far more than just a talking shop – once it sets its mind to it, through its members, it takes on issues that no other organisations have even considered and it sees them through to their conclusion. The fact that Pragnell is now taking the document as a basis for an international standard also brings a certain amount of kudos to the Society. There is no question that the SEE still has a very important role to play and that should be recognised by one and all.

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