R User Groups Report

21 November 2013

Despite being the birthplace of R, New Zealand has seen a relatively slow development of a linked community of R users and R User Groups (RUGs). Of course there have been many talks concerning ways to use R (for better or worse) over the years, but as befits one of R's founders, Ross Ihaka gave what appears to be the first talk to a fledgling R Users Group at Waikato University on 16 October 2011. That talk was probably the inspiration for the only subsequent meeting (so far) of the Waikato R Users Group in April 2012, organised jointly by Vanessa Cave and Steven Miller (also the joint chairs of the 2013 NZSA+ORSNZ Conference, as it happens!). Steven emailed me to note there could be some further discussion on this particular RUG's future activities during the 2013 Conference.

This year has seen a definite increase in RUG activity though, so much so that we now have an R User Groups Representative, John Haywood, on the NZSA Exec. The NZSA is keen to endorse and celebrate the strong links between R and the current New Zealand statistics community. An R users group was formed in Auckland on 9 January 2013, with their first meeting facilitated using Meetup on 8 March attended by 33 people. A second meeting followed, addressed by Thomas Lumley and with 38 attendees, on 25 September. The Auckland R users group (AKLRUG) is organized by JieFu Yu and Lisa Chen, and they now have 146 members signed up on their Meetup site, which is here: http://www.meetup.com/Auckland-R-Users-Group-AKLRUG/

Peter Ellis, the Manager of Sector Performance in the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, was keen to increase the use of R within his team, and in the government sector more generally. Peter teamed up with long-time R user and NZSA Exec member Ian Westbrooke from the Department of Conservation and together they addressed a very well attended (100+ people) lunchtime meeting in Wellington on 13 June 2013, titled "Statistical Analysis in the Government Sector using R Language: Experiences from MBIE and DOC". That presentation was the catalyst for a Wellington Statistics Group meeting, attended by 45 people on 15 August, where we launched the Wellington R Users Group (WRUG), which currently has 63 members. Our second WRUG meeting was the first organised using Meetup, with 32 attendees on 10 October. A third WRUG meeting is currently being planned for mid-December 2013. Lisa Chen (Harmonic Analytics) from the AKLRUG organising team has also played a role in setting up WRUG, along with James Hogan (MBIE) and Shirley Wu (Harmonic Analytics). John Haywood has continued his involvement since the first WRUG meeting hosted by WSG. The WRUG Meetup site is here: http://www.meetup.com/Wellington-R-Users-Group-WRUG/

Moving forward, there have been discussions concerning the formation of a RUG in Christchurch, and the above discussion about the Waikato group hints at a potential re-birth there. Harmonic Analytics have got several people who are keen to share some of their experiences with R, as evidenced by their membership of various RUG organizing teams. I am keen to hear about any further developments or suggestions in regard to the growth of the NZSA's involvement in this increasing popularization of the use of R.

John Haywood
R User Groups Representative