

ASTRONOMY FORUM: NOTES FROM 21 DECEMBER 2011

1. In attendance: Forum members and John Womersley (STFC), Colin Vincent (STFC), Terry O'Connor (STFC), Chris Millward (HEFCE), Robert Massey (RAS).
2. The Chair (Roger Davies) opened the meeting at 2 pm.
3. As usual the Chair stressed the importance of engaging with political representatives and asked for an update on this from Forum members.

Tom Hartquist (Leeds) described in positive terms the visit of Alec Shelbrooke (Conservative MP for Elmet and Rothwell) to the University of Leeds physics department. Melvyn Hoare (Head of Department in Leeds) hosted the visit, where staff discussed a number of issues including large facilities, blue skies research, intellectual property, knowledge transfer and the Goonhilly project.

The Chair then described a breakfast meeting with Mr Shelbrooke a few days later, which he attended with the RAS Deputy Executive Secretary and where similar points were made.

4. STFC: Forward plans and preparation for the 2014 Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR 2014): John Womersley and Colin Vincent

John Womersley outlined plans for the future direction of the Research Council, after which Colin Vincent gave an update on STFC-funded astronomy programmes. Their presentation is available on the RAS website at

http://www.ras.org.uk/images/stories/Astronomy_Forum/STFC%20RAS%20forum%20Dec%202011.ppt

In the ensuing discussion points made included:

- VISTA is an excellent example of how the Forum can help shape STFC policy
- Despite the VISTA penalty, UK researchers have a very good chance of getting VLT observing time and should still apply
- ESO is looking at the number of UK co-investigators (rather than Principal Investigators) to avoid manipulation of the system
- The membership of the ING / JAC review panel will be on the STFC website
- The replacement for Peter Knight on STFC Council will be a scientist
- The composition of Science Board is very strong. With 16 members it can't have experts from every area, but it does take a holistic view.

5. Astronomy Grants Panel: STFC Consolidated grants scheme: Andy Lawrence

Andy Lawrence updated the Forum on the outcome of the first round of applications made under the new STFC consolidated grants scheme. His full presentation can be downloaded

from http://www.ras.org.uk/images/stories/Astronomy_Forum/Lawrence%20AstroForum-presentn.pdf

The discussion that followed included the following points:

- The ratio of the research associate : total costs includes Full Economic Costing (FEC)
- The process worked well, but comments on it were collected during holidays
- That happened as it was difficult to find an ideal time to chase referees
- Having a February deadline will help with e.g. renewal of research associate contracts
- Uncertainty in funding makes it hard for groups to plan
- Mechanism was made clear – groups responded in the expected way
- Overbidding is natural, particularly with just 0.6 research associates per academic
- RCUK has *not* asked for the salaries of postholders not to be (inflation-) indexed
- STFC is still planning for the indexation of grants
- Process of forming consortia was a mixed success – the approach was sensible, but not all examples in applications were properly thought through
- Lab-based groups depend on technical support – has this been considered?
- To get funding for technical support, the grant application needs to be structured into discrete projects. There are groups that received that support this time

6. HEFCE funding update (Chris Millward)

Chris Millward from HEFCE updated the forum on the plans for funding of physical science degree courses in English universities. His full presentation can be downloaded from http://www.ras.org.uk/images/stories/Astronomy_Forum/HEFCE%20Chris%20Millward.ppt

Forum attendees made the following points:

- Applicants are responding positively to 4 year degrees as most of them realise they will never repay their debt
- How does the AAB (A level grades) cap work?
- There is open competition (rather than an application quota) above this level but the proportion varies between courses and institutions. In engineering 20% of course places are open, in physics 50%.
- None of the cut of 20000 places on degree courses is coming from physics
- What prospect is there of a joined up policy on MSc provision – our institution runs MSc astrophysics? What about the distinction between taught and research MSc courses?
- University policy varies massively on MSc courses. HEFCE is exploring whether we have the funds to stabilise this situation for a year or two, but in the long term we need to think about how best to manage the pipeline of movement from undergraduate to postgraduate courses
- The Government is now turning its attention to postgraduate education

- The new system means that universities can't 'top slice' income so easily – so the extra subsidy (for lab-based courses) is essential
- If some universities collapse, will HEFCE funding be redistributed appropriately?
- No universities will collapse in the short term – if one did close, the pot of funding for it would go elsewhere

7. Any other business

The Chair explained that the RAS will install videoconferencing in the near future, so Forum members may not all need to travel to Burlington House for meetings.

John Womersley highlighted the RCUK discussion on its capital funding roadmap, with input being sought from learned societies in the first instance. He also mentioned that applications for STFC Science in Society Fellowships are now open.

8. The Chair closed the Forum at 4.30 pm.