

ASTRONOMY FORUM: NOTES FROM 26TH JANUARY 2011

1. In attendance: Forum members (including Roger Davies as chair); Albert Zijlstra (Manchester), Melvin Hoare (Leeds), Ian Smail (Durham), Mark Lester (Leicester), Chris Owen (UCL / MSSL), Rob Kennicutt (Cambridge), Pat Roche (Oxford), Glenn White (OU), David Wands (Portsmouth), Andrew Liddle (Sussex), Malcolm Bremer (Bristol), Tom Marsh (Warwick), Keith Horne (St Andrews), Don Kurtz (UCLan), Mark Bailey (Armagh), Graham Woan (Glasgow), Iain Steele (LJMU), Stephen Smartt (Queens), Ofer Lahav (UCL), John Peacock (Edinburgh), Trevor Ponman (Birmingham), Ian McHardy (Southampton), Mike Merrifield (Nottingham), Clive Tadhunter (Sheffield), Steve Schwartz (Imperial), Janet Drew (Herts), David Burgess (QMUL), Coel Hellier (Keele), John Womersley (STFC), Terry O'Connor (STFC), Colin Vincent (STFC), Sharon Cosgrave (STFC), Robert Massey (RAS), David Elliott (RAS)
2. The Chair opened the meeting at 1 p.m. He welcomed Forum members and set out the business for the meeting, including an update on the STFC Delivery Programme, VISTA update and reform to the STFC grants system.
3. Before starting formal business, the Chair reminded Forum members of the importance of contact with local MPs and other representatives. He urged Forum members to get in touch with their MP if they had not already done so, for example inviting them to visit their university department.
4. RM reminded the Forum of the RAS Demographic Survey now underway and asked Forum members to help publicise it with individual researchers, as well as completing the Head of Department questionnaires.
5. STFC Delivery Plan in light of budget allocations (John Womersley)

John Womersley gave a presentation on the STFC Delivery Plan for 2011-15. The Plan is shaped by a better than expected Spending Review (SR) settlement and resulting STFC budget allocation and as promised in the Drayson Review, sees partitioning into international subscriptions, UK large facilities and the 'core' science programme. The PowerPoint slides from the presentation (and those on E-ELT, VISTA and the new STFC grants system) can be seen at <http://www.stfc.ac.uk/resources/pdf/rasforum012011.pdf>

A discussion followed the presentation. Points made included:

- Will there be a written statement from STFC refuting the suggestion that R+D work in universities will transfer to STFC labs?
JW: this could be put in the guidance for grant applications.
- Can you summarise the impact of the SR on the UK Space Agency?

JW: the budget looks insufficient to carry on the same level of activity, but it has gone up and is within the science ring fence.

- How have the funds for central government strategic priorities impacted on those available for other science?

JW: they haven't – we are however contemplating setting up an advisory panel for this area if funds increase

- We should also have the UK Space Agency and HEFCE officials responsible for the REF to future Forum meetings

6. E-ELT update (John Womersley)

The presentation outlined the impact of the Brazilian accession to ESO, the expected timescale for member states (including the UK) approving and initiating E-ELT construction and the risks to this programme.

- Can you update us on the instrumentation programme?
JW: this is now going through the peer review process

7. VISTA (John Womersley)

The presentation summarised the details of the €18m (£13.17m) proposed settlement between STFC and ESO associated with the VISTA telescope. The STFC offer includes around €12.2m (£8.93m) of 'in-kind' elements together with a temporary voluntary reduction in the UK use of the ESO telescopes, to value €5.8m (£4.24m). The latter equates to a reduction of 116 nights of observing time to be spaced out over 1-2 years.

- Forum members discussed the best solution for managing the reduction and how it might be distributed, generally favouring a faster rate of time sacrifice over a shorter period.

8. Grants Round and Reform to STFC grants system (Colin Vincent)

The last STFC grants round saw 98 applications for standard grants and 16 applications for rolling grants. Roughly 1 in 7 applications were successful, yielding funds for a total of 56 PDRAs and 7 technical support staff.

Following the Review led by James Stirling, STFC is now implementing a new grants system that will supersede the existing approach of rolling and standard grants. The presentation explained the details of the methodology of the new system, including the number of grants that can be held by a department, the duration of grants and how smaller institutions can participate.

STFC is also considering the introduction of a scheme to foster early career researchers with modest grant funding.

In the discussion that followed Forum members raised a number of points:

- Can you apply for further funding within the 4th year of a grant?
CV: Absolutely not
- This outcome is not what we (on the Review panel) recommended – funding for only 3 years will make it much harder to issue contracts for PDRAs as universities will not approve these posts until the resources are in place for the whole period
CV: the implementation team is following the advice of the Review panel and from the AGP.
- There are major hiring and firing issues for research staff with this 3 year break point in place – we urgently need guidelines on how to make this work
CV: in some cases we will have to provide bridging funds – and the number of PDRAs available will not change as a result of the change in the system

9. e-VAL

JW presented the new e-VAL system, an online data collection system piloted in July 2010 that will help researchers record the impact of their work. This will be rolled out in 2011.

- (Chair): please work with HEFCE to standardise the approach to this, given the need to record impact for REF assessment

10. AOB

Other items of business raised in the Forum included the House of Commons Science and Technology Select Committee inquiry into astronomy and particle physics – Forum members were encouraged to send their thoughts to the RAS for the Society submission as well as submitting evidence from their own research groups.

JW discussed proposals for the future of the island observatory sites in the northern hemisphere, including UKIRT on Hawaii and the ING on La Palma.

11. The Chair closed the meeting at 3.15 p.m.