

Astronomy Forum Meeting Notes

23 November 2018, Royal Astronomical Society

1. Introduction

Those present at the meeting elected the President of the Royal Astronomical Society, Prof. Mike Cruise, to be the chair.

2. Reports on political engagement

- RAS - EWASS was attended by both MPs and MEPs
 - Sci&Tech committee - discussion about business plan, e.g. publishing Plan S
 - Taken part in consultations on Brexit etc.
 - 2020 bicentenary - political engagement also planned with this.
- One participant had written to MP Jeremy Wright several times, but disappointing responses received. RAS viewpoint would be that it's still worthwhile to write to local MPs, to continue raising awareness.

3. Welfare of students and staff: tackling sexual misconduct (Antonia Bevan, 1752 Group)

Dr Antonia Bevan presented an update on the work of the 1752 Group, and recommendations for action by the community. She discussed:

- Overview of problem, definitions, impacts.
- Reports, survey results & statistics.
- Barriers to change.
- Changes required – institutional change, and change by research groups.
- Progress so far, 1752 group activities.

Discussion/points raised

- Does the Equalities Act definition just cover general harassment, rather than sexual harassment?
 - Correct, sexual harassment is a more specific case.

- o What can the RAS do?
 - Give support to the 1752 Group, and access to trained RAS staff to advise on and help with reporting. Place pressure on institutions to have adequate codes of conduct in place, try to achieve a standardised policy for UK research groups. Also have funding restrictions - e.g. Wellcome trust refuses funding to proven perpetrators.
- o Should research councils also incorporate this in their codes of conducts and funding requirements?
 - Yes, but with a caveat - there is a danger that just adding a tickbox to a form just incentivises institutions to make it harder to report problems, in order to protect their own people and maintain access to grants. Perhaps a better approach is for funding councils to consider investigating these things themselves.
- o Is there scope for the RAS or research councils to have dedicated staff members to support people who need to report issues to their institutions, even including helping with the process and paperwork?
 - UKRI do have people looking at this, and the in-house person is a source of advice as well as being involved in general policy.
 - RAS can provide support to some extent, but staff members are few and not trained in this. Need more professional services beyond a certain point. The RAS can look at changes regarding funding for grants though.
 - Recipients of misconduct are usually early-career researchers – the vast majority can't go to employment lawyers, and they're not members of trade unions, who represent alleged perpetrators as well as victims. Any support and advice from the RAS is better than nothing, and would send a message. Sometimes a question of just defining what sexual misconduct is – official guidelines would help here.
 - RAS are not the employers of those involved either, and have no jurisdiction. It doesn't know the details, has no right to access confidential employment details, and for these purposes is just a third party. Society currently spends quite a bit on legal fees to protect the organisation from future, more significant, legal fees. Perhaps could do more by requiring that institutions have a proper code of conduct in order to fund grants. But it remains a complex situation for the organisation.
- o Perhaps there are small fees, legal or otherwise, that RAS could support and fund for specific cases?
 - Issue is complicated. Currently no research on causes from community, or full proposition on how to tackle the problem. Lacking understanding of appropriate response, and 1752 group is voluntary - any funding or support would be appreciated.

- o Are there any alternative routes for supporting volunteers working in 1752 group? E.g. any grant funding that can be allocated for people working to solve this issue?
 - “High on priority list for UKRI”. No specific plan at the moment. RAS should think about having financial support available for people bringing these cases, or about other possible ways to support, at least e.g. collecting data.
- o Another challenge is the ability of departments to be able to enforce a code of conduct. Excessive amount of time needed to put codes of conduct in place.
 - Another possible difficulty - institutions enforce their own top-down policy, research groups often can't have their own different codes of conduct.
 - Issue also being considered by NAM organisers, e.g. situation where alleged perpetrator + victim need to register for professional meetings - what needs to be done to make the space safe?
- o Community needs guidelines on what to have in codes of conduct, e.g. what laws and official guidance are. RAS could help with this: ‘Here’s what we expect...’
 - A simple statement of RAS standards would be helpful, even when the RAS doesn't have any jurisdiction.
- o Cases always seem to be very badly handled by institutions. Are there any cases of good handling?
 - Agreed, virtually none are handled well, most extremely poorly, often handling of the case is more traumatic than the actual event. What is a good way of doing it? Some things are clear cut - being specific about details – e.g. it should not take 2 months for the institution to organise a panel, cases should not take 3 years to complete. Changing culture and atmosphere more difficult / subtle / complex - need to research and try some different things to find out best way forward.

4. The science policy landscape in the Brexit era (James Tooze, Campaign for Science and Engineering)

James Tooze, of the Campaign for Science and Engineering (CASE), presented an update on the current science policy landscape. He referred to:

- Government spending review - want to raise R&D intensity. Opportunity to advocate importance of funding for fundamental research.
- Call for case studies - different types of core research funding. What would it enable, what could be the next steps for the sector?
- Brexit - what do we require from any agreement that will not harm UK research base? CASE working on mitigating consequences from other sectors that might affect science, e.g. immigration policy.

Discussion/points raised

- o Industry not enamoured of Horizon2020 - academics didn't engage enough with industry, so seen as a win for science vs. a loss for industry. Industry good at forming lobbying groups, which are very effective in influencing government. Does academia need better organised lobbying groups?
 - CASE tries to, but it's difficult with limited resources. Correct that there is often a disconnect between industry and academia.
- o Still tough landscape, with e.g. flat cash. Next year spending review - what realistic prospect of core funding being increased? Message from government is that they don't trust research councils to spend it well, don't recognise the importance e.g. Einstein & relativity was fundamental research, but has now led to GPS.
 - CASE trying to advocate for this, but arguments like this are probably not heard by government departments, especially those where research is not their focus.

5. Preparing for the Future (Mark Thomson, Science and Technology Facilities Council)

Mark Thomson (STFC) presented an update on STFC activities. He referred to:

- Strategic plan & key priorities.
- Equality, Diversity & Inclusion - new high-level Advisory & Implementation group.
- UKRI funding & opportunities.
- Astronomy update.
- Government spending review update.

Discussion/points raised

- o 2.4% increase in Science & Innovation budget - most coming from private sector, will academic sector receive less?
 - Still need increase in investment in public sector, whether STFC will be able to access this depends on implementation. STFC in fairly good position for this funding though.
- o Teaching & research interlinked at universities - dangers in education funding, will have impact on research. What can UKRI do to make it clear that groups can't cut fees and still maintain capacity to supervise students?
 - Need is recognised by UKRI, not being ignored.
- o Priority projects – Astronomy Advisory Panel (AAP) asking PIs if they want to make proposals public. Would help to inform public.

- STFC looking at how to take this forward. Reasons for asking people to prioritise - community endorsement provides much stronger argument.
- STFC didn't do brilliantly in Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF). Funding seems to be unfairly weighted towards particular streams e.g. GCRF, those focused on impact or driving industry innovation. Does this community just have to accept that?
 - GCRF are targeted funds for impact, but there are other funds, driven by excellence. E.g. Strategic Priorities fund, Talent fund, quite a few strings attached, but our field is quite well-aligned for international collaboration, strategic priorities etc.
- Most successful GCRF proposals have been around skills. This community is strong in capacity-building, current framing is trying to change mindset of what funding is used for.
 - We do however need to be vocal in advocating fundamental science, since impact will be realised, just at some point in future.
- How will desired increase in skills and training be delivered? Centres for Doctoral Training (CDTs) have been successful, but perhaps went too far, community fragmented.
 - Agreed that there's huge pressure on the core programme, and we definitely need to maintain education pipeline and protect the PhD programme. High priority is to make sure we plan and get the PhDs we need, rather than just running a replacement programme.
- UKRI Fellowships - not many in our area. May be a bit of lag - community wants to see what happens first before putting proposals forward.
 - Also, questions about grant process - STFC often not visible as a grant-awarding body because of nature of consolidated grant model. [Credit for individuals having research funding is masked by awards being within a consolidated grants wrapper, with only one PI.]
 - We need more core funding too.
- Are there things that RAS could be saying that UKRI can't, especially given upcoming bicentenary opportunities?
 - Broadly OK, but one important message is focusing on skills for the future.
- Timescales are often unrealistic for targeted funds e.g. GCRF - too rushed, and reduces potential for impact. Inefficient process – are any changes possible?
 - STFC is given a funding profile to be spent over a few years, but there are reasons for it. One of the motivations for Priority projects was to have more lead time.
- Is there any way we can influence the myriad of different funds?
 - Division into various pots is sometimes limiting, but the division is decided by BEIS/Secretary of State level.

- Funding for areas such as public engagement has grown in recent years.
 - Public engagement is definitely in future plans. It's a fundamental part of STFC's mission, want to push in this area and it's not forgotten.

6. Astronomy Grants Panel report (Jim Wild)

Prof. Jim Wild (Lancaster University) presented an update on the Astronomy Grants Panel. He summarised for 2018:

- No significant growth in number of individual applicants or projects over 3 years.
- Average overbid ratio dropped from ~3 to ~2 - not clear why, perhaps evidence of community being more realistic.
- Increasing overheads => 3 fewer postdocs funded c.f. 3 years ago, can't support 15% FTE funding for academics any more either.
- Assessment of biases - same gender imbalance at all levels of application - signifies no 'leaky pipeline' at least, similarly no deviation from underlying population in terms of number of female vs. male PIs winning grants. Panel biases/Co-Is also analysed and managed - no significant bias found.

7. Subject Evaluations (Don Pollacco)

Prof. Don Pollacco (University of Warwick) presented the latest round of subject evaluations, with an update that budget reviews of the astronomy community are in progress.

8. Space Science at the UK Space Agency: Challenge and Opportunity (Chris Lee, UK Space Agency)

Chris Lee (UKSA) presented an update on UKSA activities. He discussed:

- Programme & mission updates.
- Challenges & opportunities.

Discussion/points raised

- Separating space science from research council to a separate agency ~8 years ago now hasn't worked well. A more coordinated strategy is needed.
 - UKSA not involved in UKRI roadmap discussion until quite late.
- Agreement that space science lives uncomfortably within UKSA, but disagreement that dual key system doesn't work, 2 agencies have made it work efficiently and effectively in the past.
 - There are issues with dual key at lower levels - e.g. trying to support instrumentation with UKRI, but told it should be funded by UKSA. Similar problem - disconnect between exploration and planetary science.

- Recognise the need to build up expertise in labs - STFC grants don't support any of that, no funding for fundamental infrastructure. Needs to be a discussion about who is responsible for funding things like this.
 - Agreed, there has been discussion about establishing new centres for this. Currently re-inventing the wheel, treating the process independently every time.

9. AOB

- Deadlines for RAS council nominations and thesis prizes are approaching.