



*Advancing
Astronomy and
Geophysics*

ROYAL ASTRONOMICAL SOCIETY

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MINUTES OF THE COUNCIL MEETING HELD ON 13 MARCH 2008 AT 1300 IN THE RAS COUNCIL ROOM

1. PRESENT: Professor M. Rowan-Robinson (President); Professor R.L. Davies; Professor R.A. Harrison and Professor I.D. Howarth (Vice-Presidents); Professor P.G. Murdin (Treasurer); Dr M.A. Hapgood and Dr H. J. Walker (secretaries); Dr A.J. Ball; Professor M.A. Barstow; Professor M.G. Edmunds; Dr L. Fletcher; Professor B.K. Gibson; Dr J. Mitton; Dr V. Nakariakov and Dr J.A. Wild.

APOLOGIES: Professor M. Bailey (Vice-President); Dr. I. Crawford (Secretary); Professor J. Hough; Professor M. Cruise; Dr J. Greaves and Professor I. Robson.

IN ATTENDANCE: Professor A. Fabian; D.E. Elliott (Executive Secretary) and Dr R. Massey (Policy Officer).

2. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of 7 February 2008 were approved and signed

3. MATTERS ARISING

3.1 The Policy Officer reported that 67 fellows had indicated that they had written to their MP about the STFC Budget settlement. In addition there had been a number of Parliamentary Questions and 2 attempts to secure Early Day Motions. All of this had ensured that the STFC funding crisis remained on the political agenda.

4. PRESIDENT'S BUSINESS

4.1 The President reported that he had requested Professor John Womersley, Director Science Programmes at the STFC, to provide more feedback to project leaders whose projects had received low prioritisation in the Programmatic Review. Council felt that the credibility of STFC rested on being transparent and open about the peer review process which had produced the outcomes announced in the Review. Without more information about the criteria used, the scores given against them - and more time in which to make a considered response, the 'consultation' exercise could do even more harm to STFC-community relations. Though the President was concerned that the entire Review should not be opened up and that the community had to accept that *some* projects would be rated lower than others he agreed to send the following message to Professor Womersley:

'The RAS Council welcomes the consultation, but has serious concerns about how it is going. Those who have seen feedback comments find that they are much too brief and general to be helpful in framing a thoughtful and constructive response.

We strongly advise that either the feedback comments need to be expanded to make clear against what criteria there were concerns about lower rated projects, or the average scores against each criterion for each project should be published. We note that in some areas we have not been able to identify who has received the feedback.

The time-scale for the consultation is just too short to be effective or inspire community confidence. We strongly advise that it be expanded past the RAS NAM meeting which ends April 4th.

We urge very strongly that the chairs of the ad hoc panels be invited to the PPAN meeting which generates the final priority list. This will greatly increase the community's confidence in the outcome. Without the above measures we do not think the community will have confidence in this peer review process. In future we hope that consultation of the community via an advisory structure will take place before processes of Programmatic Review and Science Strategy'.

Council also considered whether the Society's response to the STFC budget settlement had exaggerated its adverse impact on the community. In particular the President noted that over the forthcoming triennium the number of post-doctoral researchers to be funded by STFC grants would total 869, compared to 841 in the previous 3 years. It was agreed, though, that this represented a sharp reversal in the *upward direction* of grants in recent years and, since they were allocated competitively, for some departments the outcome could be grave.

4.2 Turning to the future advisory structures which STFC had agreed to put in place to ensure that decisions would be based on better consultation and communication with the community, the President reported that the RAS had been invited to suggest which panels should be established and, should it wish to do so, to nominate chairs for them. Following discussion, it was agreed that the 5 *ad hoc* panels created for the consultation on the Programmatic Review should be pared down to 3 viz;

- Astronomy (including ground and space based observation, exo-planets and theory)
- Solar System Science (including Solar Physics, STP, planetary sciences, exploration and theory)
- Astroparticle and Fundamental Physics (including dark matter, neutrinos, gravitational waves, CMB and theory)

Further it was proposed that, given its broader scope, the Astronomy Panel should be bigger than the others to ensure the correct representation of expertise.

4.3 It was noted that STFC's Science Strategy, on which decisions about projects and grants should be based, and in whose formulation the community needed to be involved, had yet to appear. Accordingly, it was proposed that STFC should be asked to share the *draft* strategy document with the RAS at this stage to allow for input and that until it was finalised STFC, in considering grant applications, either should exclude 'fit to strategy' from its list of criteria or signify that they would be evaluated on the existing (PPARC) one.

4.4 The President informed Council that he had been invited to meet Professor Wakeham, chair of the Review into the Health of Physics, on 15 April. He expected he would be asked to prepare a detailed, 20-30 page, submission covering the following issues:

- an overview of current strengths and weaknesses of astronomy and related sciences and how the disciplines should develop in the future

- an analysis of what actions need to be taken to improve areas of weakness
- a description of the Society's activities to support UK researchers and
- in particular how this was used to assist them to achieve user engagement and economic impact;

Noting that the 2005 International Review of Perceptions of UK Physics and Astronomy contained a great deal of relevant data, and that it would be expedient to coordinate this exercise with the IoP's, it was agreed that the following would be asked to produce drafts on particular aspects for inclusion in the submission viz

- Funding (Professor Davies)
- Theory (Professor Gibson)
- STP/Solar Physics (Dr Fletcher)
- Geophysics (Professor Gubbins)
- Economic Impact (President and Professor Cruise)
- Role of RAS (Treasurer and Executive Secretary)

President-Designate, Professor Fabian, agreed to take responsibility for overall coordination noting that astronomy, measured in terms of citations, was the only physical science where the UK's global standing competed with the USA's. It was important that the benefits this brought to the UK were pointed up in the Society's submission. Finally the President undertook to contact the Presidents of the American, German and French Astronomical Societies, as well as the IAU, AGU and EGU, requesting that they write to Professor Wakeham in support of UK astronomy and related sciences.

5. POLICY & PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

5.1 The draft Annual Report for 2007 was noted and, with minor corrections, approved for submission to the AGM in May. In particular Council noted the following priorities for 2008:

- *'While continuing to cater for its general membership, the over-riding aim of the Society will remain to provide leadership for its members who are career scientists. Implementation of the STFC Delivery Plan, in its final form, will cause upheaval and uncertainty in university departments and research institutions and the Society will devote much of its effort to minimizing both and campaigning for an increased astronomy budget in the next Spending Review covering the period 2011- 14, preparations for which begin in 2008. At the same time the Society will press for changes to the structure and operations of STFC to ensure better communications with and representation of the community before decisions are finalized.*
- *The Society will step up its education and public outreach activities in the run up to the International Year of Astronomy 2009, acknowledging the power of astronomy to attract students into studying science at school and beyond, a government priority. This will include promoting and improving the 'kite-marked' bank of education resources aimed at school teachers, financial support of activities being planned at the local, national and international levels to engage the public's interest in astronomy in 2009 and the provision of speakers to schools, cruise ships and other interested parties.*
- *The Society will increase its international activities*
- *The Society will plan the move to electronic only publication for its research journals (by 2011) and launch the first books to be published under the agreement with Springer.*

- *Negotiations will be held with publishers to secure the right of fellows to remotely access electronic versions of scientific journals from a computer anywhere in the world (a particularly valuable service for members in developing countries or those not attached to academic libraries)*
- *The Society will investigate the feasibility of creating a new class of membership (provisionally called 'Friends of the RAS') to increase its public visibility and to offer the general public the opportunity of having closer relations with professional astronomers'*

5.1A Council noted and approved the Abstract of Accounts for 2007 and Draft Budget for 2008 with one correction viz the amount allocated in 2008 on grants was increased in line with RPI to £85,000. The Treasurer explained that the deficit shown on the Draft Budget was *before* transfers from the general fund and that, in respect of the current account and excluding exceptional expenditure like the refurbishment, the Society was expected to run a surplus of c. £150,000 in 2008.

5.2 The Annual Report of the Policy Officer which, *inter alia*, reported that he had given no fewer than 38 TV and radio interviews and issued 54 press releases, was noted with great satisfaction.

5.3 The Policy Officer introduced the questionnaire, designed to survey Astronomy degree courses, which was to be sent to RAS Points of Contact. It was hoped that by making it short it would be completed and returned in time to inform the Society's submission to the Wakeham review (as well as allowing for periodic repeats to monitor trends). It was suggested that some of the terms used ('course' 'module' etc) would benefit from definition since their meaning varied from institution to institution. It was also important to clarify the census data to be used and to explain that the statistics on job first destinations referred to the 2006 cohort of graduates.

6. ORGANIZATION AND STRUCTURE

6.1 The Treasurer sought, and obtained, Council's approval for presenting Annual Contributions for 2009 to the 2008 AGM which increased in line with inflation (RPI). It was noted that age related concessions cut off at 30 years and that this might explain the relatively small numbers of post-doctoral research assistants in the Society since, until they achieved a permanent appointment (at average age 35) the increased cost of RAS membership, compared to the student rate, was a strong disincentive. While the proposed contribution rates were agreed, the Chair-Designate of the Membership Committee, Professor Gibson, agreed to analyse the impact of the current age related concessions on membership and, in the light of this, make proposals for changing it at the 2009 AGM. It was noted that, compared to other European Astronomical Societies, the costs of membership of the RAS were high. However, the range of activities available and benefits offered to RAS members were also much higher.

6.2 The Treasurer spoke to a paper which explained that the Society's Defined Benefit Pension Scheme was in deficit and that it was required to implement a recovery plan. The Treasurer, accordingly, proposed to increase the employer's contributions from 19.3% to 26.9% and to make a capital payment to the Fund of £172,000 from reserves. This was agreed. In response to a suggestion that costs might be saved by trying to negotiate a joint scheme with other learned societies, the Treasurer explained that this Pension Scheme had been closed to new members for over 5 years and, *vita brevis*, would gradually cease to be a liability to the Society.

6.3 The Chair of the Membership Committee, Dr Mitton, outlined the current status of the on-line questionnaire designed to provide information about the Society's membership. To date only 140 fellows had completed it and it was agreed that a flyer urging more to do so would be included with the balloting papers due to go all members later in March. Dr Mitton also summarised discussion in the Committee about the impact on membership of the Society's high profile involvement in recent policy related issues, above all the STFC budget and Delivery Plan. She said that there had been a cautious welcome from the Fellowship for the involvement of the RAS in such policy matters, which compared with the relative lack of such involvement until recently. The membership recognised that the President and Council had difficult judgments to make about what is in the best interests of the community as a whole when making public statements and communicating with decision makers. Nevertheless, some Fellows felt that the Society should be seen to be opposing the financial cuts even more strongly than it had been. In particular, Fellows in certain research fields badly affected by the crisis believed that their specialisms had not had enough explicit mention in RAS communications. The Committee had gone on to suggest that care needed to be taken to ensure that no interest sector felt marginalised and, in the interests of good communication with the membership, that dedicated pages should be created on the RAS web site to consolidate relevant RAS documents, news and links pertaining to the STFC funding crisis. Members of Council attending the NAM, Dr Mitton believed, wearing prominent badges, should make themselves available at the RAS display during breaks, to listen to the views and concerns of the membership.

While all of these suggestions were viewed positively Council was less certain about the proposal that Fellows should be asked by email, or through the on-line polling system, to express their views on the actions taken by the RAS in response to the funding crisis, at least not until things had calmed down and a more measured opinion might be forthcoming. The Membership Committee was charged with suggesting how and when this might be best done.

Finally Dr Mitton alluded to the large numbers of the general public who had attended the Lunchtime lectures and said that this augured well for the proposed 'Friends of the RAS'. In that connection Council agreed with her suggestion that feedback forms, similar to the ones used for the Burlington House series, could be used at other lectures and events for the general public sponsored by the RAS, wherever they are located, with the aim of further building the list of people who may be interested in becoming 'Friends'.

6.4 The President praised the work of the Education Committee in overseeing the production of an on-line data base of educational resources to improve the teaching of astronomy in secondary schools. It was noted that the URL listed on the poster advertising the resources needed to be operationalised.

6.5 The report of the **Library** Committee was noted

6.6 The President considered the issues raised in a letter to him from former Vice –President, Professor Gubbins, about the lack of representation of solid earth geophysicists on Council and, his assertion of their lack of obvious benefit from continued membership of the RAS. While some thought that this suggested the need to do more to bind this community into the Society, for example by developing the synergies between seismologists and planetary scientists, other members of Council questioned the need to accommodate solid earth geophysicists in an astronomical society. Professor Fabian noted that, were this community to leave the RAS, it would present an opportunity to relaunch 'A&G' as a purely astronomy

journal which could, he believed, have a wide popular appeal. However it would also put a question mark against the Society's continued ownership of *GJI*, which would have a serious impact on the Society's income. Before taking things further Council agreed it was necessary to test Professor Gubbins' assertions by consulting a wide cross-section of solid earth geophysicists. The President, accordingly, undertook to write to them.

7. INTERNATIONAL

7.1 The President summarised the outcome of the recent meeting of the European Astronomical Society (EAS) in Leiden which he and the Executive Secretary had attended on behalf of the RAS. He felt that, since the RAS was by far the biggest astronomical society in Europe, it was important that it encouraged more UK based astronomers to become members of the EAS given the increasing significance of European-wide astronomy (even though he accepted that, until the EAS developed its services more, there was little to attract them). Currently there were fewer than 50 members based in the UK out of a total membership of around 1000. Noting that the NAM in 2009 would be a joint meeting with the EAS, it was agreed that the International Committee should be asked to look into UK-EAS relations.

8. PUBLICATIONS

8.1 Council noted and corrected the advertisement for a new Editor-in-Chief of MN RAS. In addition to the Treasurer, it was agreed that the search committee should comprise Professor Kennicut (a former Editor in Chief of *ApJ*) and Professor Edmunds.

8.2 Council noted the report of the Publications Management Committee and approved a 4% increase in the subscription rates for *MNRAS* and *GJI* for 2009.

9. OTHER

9.1 Council approved the following candidates for Election to Fellowship listed in OR/03/08 and posted on the RAS web site.

Bannister	Nigel
Bates	Samuel
Bray	Veronica
Cattermole	Derek
Cioni	Maria-Rosa L.
Dee	John Anthony
Fanaroff	Bernard
Griffiths	Martin
Hatfield	Andrew
Hirst	Paul
Hudson	Hugh
Jones	David
MacDonald	Lee
Ojha	Anupam
Pettini	Max
Reid	James
Sahlen	Martin
Schmadel	Lutz D.
Sivaraman	Bhalamurugan

White
Winter

Richard James
Kenneth

9.2 The Minutes of the Anniversary meeting of the Royal Astronomical Society of 8 February 2008 were approved and signed

AOB

10.1 Council approved the appointment of Professor Xiaofei Chen of Peking University to the Editorial Board of *GJI*

10.2 Council welcomed the approach from Cunard Lines to establish a long term relationship with the RAS. In exchange for nominating lecturers for their cruise ships the Society would benefit from its increased awareness among the quarter of a million people who sailed in them annually. Council noted, though, that it would be important to safeguard the reputation of the RAS for scientific excellence.

10.3 The President informed Council that he had been invited to represent the Society at the centenary celebrations of the Astronomy Society of Japan at which he proposed to present a handsomely bound edition of the works of the Founder President of the RAS, Sir William Herschel

Council rose at 1720

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M. Rowan-Robinson
President

9th May 2008