



*Advancing
Astronomy and
Geophysics*

ROYAL ASTRONOMICAL SOCIETY

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MINTES OF THE COUNCIL MEETING OF 8 MARCH 2007 HELD IN THE ROYAL SOCIETY OF CHEMISTRY BURLINGTON HOUSE

1. PRESENT: Professor M. Rowan-Robinson (President), Professor R.L. Davies, Professor D.W. Hughes and Professor E.R. Priest (Vice-Presidents), Professor P.G. Murdin (Treasurer), Dr M.A. Hapgood (Secretary), Dr A.J. Ball, Professor M.A. Barstow, Professor A.M. Cruise, Dr L. Fletcher, Professor J.H. Hough, Dr J. Mitton, Mr I.W. Ridpath, Professor E.I. Robson, Professor M.J. Rycroft and Professor I.P. Wright

APOLOGIES: Professor I.D. Howarth, Dr H.J. Walker (Secretaries) and Professor M.E. Bailey, Professor M.G. Edmunds and Professor D. Gubbins.

IN ATTENDANCE

D.Elliott and R. Massey

2. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting of 8 February 2007 were approved and signed

3. MATTERS ARISING

3.1 Education Resources Project

Council considered the engagement of Andrew Morrison for the equivalent of 30 days consultancy to create a fully searchable database, hosted on the RAS web site, of resources which would be Quality Assured and evaluated by RAS Fellows (both professional scientists AND teachers), designed for use by secondary school teachers and linked to key astronomy topics in the National Curriculum and relevant Public Examinations. Together with associated logistical costs, this was estimated to total some £9,000. Noting that it would be important to factor in on-going maintenance costs, which could come from a dedicated fund, Council approved.

3.2 Parliamentary Questions

The Policy Officer spoke to the previously distributed template letter, which, it was agreed, would be sent to Heads of Astronomy Departments to facilitate their requesting local MPs to ask Parliamentary Questions. Council asked that the covering note should ask that questions should be copied for information to the Society.

3.3 'Vulnerable Subjects'

The President reported that Professor Gubbins had arranged to meet a representative from HEFC to argue for the inclusion of Geophysics among the subjects eligible for support from the £75m fund established to assist vulnerable science.

4. PRESIDENT'S BUSINESS

4.1 House of Commons Science & Technology Committee Review of Space Policy

The President reported that he had given evidence to the Committee, along with Lord Rees, President of the Royal Society and Professor Len Culhane, representing the UK Space Academic Network, on 21 February. It was agreed that the Society should follow this up by submitting evidence to the public consultation on Space Strategy being conducted by the BNSC (on which Professor Cruise agreed to lead) and by using the good offices of David Heathcoat-Amory MP to seek a meeting with the Minister of Science, Malcolm Wicks. However, in connection with the latter, it was noted that it would be important to prepare for it by highlighting a limited number of issues on which the Society could speak with authority.

4.2 PPARC grants

It was brought to the attention of Council that allegations had been made by some members of the Standing Committee of Astronomy Professors (SCAP) that the Executive of PPARC had intervened improperly in the most recent grants round by changing the recommendations of the astronomy grants panel. After some discussion it was concluded that, on the basis of such knowledge available to it, there were no grounds for upholding these accusations; however that allegations had arisen at all suggested that the manner in which events had been managed by PPARC left something to be desired. It was suggested that the President should communicate this conclusion to SCAP, unless the Chief Executive of PPARC was minded to clarify the position directly.

4.3 STFC grants

Council considered reports that, in order to achieve efficiencies, when evaluating grant applications, the new research council planned to scale down peer review in favour of metrics. At this point the Chief Executive of PPARC (and Chief Executive-Designate of the STFC) Professor Keith Mason joined the meeting and remained for this and the next item. He confirmed that proposals were being prepared and would be circulated to the community for comment. He added that it was important that processes should be transparent, fair and efficient - and as least burdensome on the community as was consistent with these criteria. Decisions, which would continue to be made on scientific excellence grounds, needed to be tensioned against STFC's strategic goals.

Postscript: Following the meeting the President sent Professor Mason the following letter:

Dear Keith

It was good of you to attend the RAS Council meeting last week.

I am writing to follow up one of the issues which was raised, namely the way in which research grant applications will be assessed by the STFC.

You explained that, at £60m, the grants line was the single biggest item of expenditure and that it was necessary that decisions about allocation were fair and transparent, while taking account of the strategic priorities set by the Science Board

(based on advice from the Particle Physics, Astronomy and Nuclear Physics Science Committee as well as the Physical and Life Sciences Committee).

You said that the way in which the Grants Panels will function is still being decided and that proposals would be circulated for comment. We note, from the information on the SFTC web site, that the Astronomy Grants Panel is expected to 'take account of the recommendations of external referees and the conclusions of specialist peer review panels, particularly the proposed standard grants sub-panel...(and) may additionally convene panels to advise on new or substantially modified rolling grants, contiguous groups of research requests (such as those related to exploiting a major facility or instrument investment), or research requests which are judged (on the basis of cost or propriety) to warrant such separate, in-depth assessment'.

While we appreciate the need to make procedures as efficient as possible, and would be happy to discuss how this can be achieved, we would be concerned if, to reduce costs, the use of metrics, in place of peer review resulted in flawed outcomes. The view of the Council was that the community would rather maintain a high level of engagement through peer review, allowing that it is time consuming and onerous, than jeopardize confidence in the grant allocation process.

We look forward to having sight of the proposed structures (and hope they can be discussed during the 'community session' at the NAM on 19 April)

Yours Sincerely

Michael

4.4 Cuts in PPARC budget

Council considered the impact of the cuts to PPARC's budget announced on 27 February 2007 as a result of budgetary difficulties within the DTI. The President thought that they might be reversed if their serious consequences for the careers of young scientists were known to Ministers. While Professor Mason disagreed and counselled against an over-reaction, given the otherwise exemplary record of support for science of the present government, he felt it was important that the community should register its disappointment by means of a letter to the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. He explained that the share of the cuts falling on astronomy came to just over £1.5m of which around a half would be found from the projects line and the rest by delaying the start of some post-doctoral fellowships by 6 months. Council went on to discuss whether it could make up some of the short-fall from its general reserves and thus reduce the risk of some students, disappointed not to be moving into a PDRA in April, being lost to the community by seeking employment elsewhere. Council was divided on the need and wisdom of taking on what some thought was the responsibility of universities. A vote to establish a hardship fund of £100,000 was carried by a narrow margin, which the President deemed insufficient to justify such a large commitment. It was, though, agreed to send the following letter to Alastair Darling, Secretary of State at the DTI

'Dear Secretary of State,

I am writing to you about the impact on the astronomy community of the reduction in funds available to PPARC (and its successor body STFC) in 2007/08 as a result of the budgetary difficulties elsewhere in the DTI.

The scientific community was surprised by this announcement, the more so in view of the government's impressive record of support for science over the past ten years.

While PPARC's share of the reduction is only £3.1m, it nevertheless has a significant impact on what PPARC can commit for 2007-8. Specifically PPARC has stated that it is unlikely that it will now be possible to start new projects this year and will delay the start of new postdoctoral posts by six months. The RAS is concerned that a group of students finishing their PhDs, and hoping to continue to a postdoctoral position in the UK, will find themselves unemployed for 6 months. There is a risk that the UK will lose promising talent to overseas countries or that they will leave scientific research.

While not wishing to over-dramatize the situation, the RAS is extremely concerned about postgraduate students placed in this position and is investigating the scope of the problem and whether there is anything we can do to help them.

We very much hope that you can do something to mitigate the very negative impression this action has conveyed to the scientific community'.

Postscript: Following the meeting it was agreed to contact Heads of Department to ascertain the actual scale of the problem, it being understood that Council would need to approve any financial contributions that might be considered. Accordingly the following letter was sent in the name of the President:

'Dear Colleague,

As you know, on 2007 February 27, PPARC announced that, due to budget cuts, it will be postponing until October 2007 the start of any new, unnamed, posts within grants that would have started after April 2007. This measure will fall most directly and personally on early-career scientists, particularly students taking up post-doctoral positions for the first time.

Of course, group leaders and department heads will be striving to re-jig budgets and other arrangements so as to mitigate the effects of this decision on individual people. While we hope these work, the Society is concerned that not all these efforts will succeed and that this could cause, at best, loss of momentum to some early careers in astronomy and, at worst, hardship to the people affected.

Where it is clear that, but for the budget cuts, an individual would have started in a new post-doc position in or around April 2007 and has a guaranteed position as from October 2007, the Society wants to see what it can do to help. Accordingly, we invite you (whether or not you are a member) to contact the RAS (by e-mail to treasurer@ras.org.uk) by **31 March 2007**'

4.5 Attribution of ESA subscription to RAE

The President referred to the holding response from Professor Mason, to the joint letter from the Society and the Institute of Physics concerning the 'in kind' attribution of ESA facilities in the compilation of RAE data. It was agreed to post the correspondence on the web site and to write to Professor Mason requesting him to pursue the issue and, if possible, make an announcement at the RAS NAM in April.

5. BURLINGTON HOUSE

The Executive Secretary gave a situation report on the refurbishment works which, as a result of unexpected though not serious problems, were running some 3 weeks late. He explained that slippage had been factored into the project and that the delay was manageable. He went on to ask for approval for a revised budget for the proposed engraved illuminated window, which was given. Finally, he reported that the first of

the Burlington House lectures had been delivered on March 1. The next, to be given on the mid-summer Solstice on Stonehenge, promised to be just as popular a draw with the public.

Postscript: subsequent to the meeting it was discovered that securing planning permission to illuminate the windows was uncertain; accordingly it was decided to revert to engraving clear glass within the existing window frames

6. ORGANIZATION AND STRUCTURE

6.1 RAS Web Site

Postponed

6.2 Trustees Report for 2006

The Executive Secretary asked for comments on the 2006 Report, particularly the 'Plans for the Future' section, which would be presented at the AGM on May 11 2007. It was agreed that the bullet point on education and outreach should be given more prominence and that media and PR relations should be highlighted. Otherwise Council agreed that the emphasis placed on advancing the interests of the professional community was correct.

6.3 Abstract of Accounts

The Accountant joined the meeting for this item, which was introduced by the Treasurer. It was agreed that the new-style presentation of financial activities was easier to understand but some items e.g. 'governance costs' remained obscure and that the explanatory notes section could be expanded.

6.4 Proposed annual contributions for 2008

The Treasurer explained that he needed to correct one statement in the paper which had been circulated and to propose a change to the 2008 contributions in the light of recent discussion about post-doctoral students. The correction was to the statement attributing the failure to increase membership income in 2006 to demographics, whereas it was as a result of applying Revenue and Customs Gift Aid rules. The change, was a proposal that the transition from student to PDRA should be eased by offering the latter a discount on their first year's contributions. This was because the net earnings of PDRAs were little different from those of PhD Students, who paid a lower rate, which could be a contributory reason for the low numbers of post-docs (of the order of 10%) who joined the Society. This was approved and incorporated into the following recommendation to the May 2007 AGM:

Rate 1 Concessionary rates for students and older Fellows: £25.00. For:

1. Fellows who on 2008 Jan 1 (or at the time of election in 2008) are in full time education studying Astronomy, Geophysics or a related subject, without age restriction and with certification.
2. Fellows who, after 2003 Jan 1, validly exercise their rights under Byelaw 38

Rate 2 Concessionary rates for recently qualified and newly elected Fellows: £60.00. For:

Fellows who on 2008 Jan 1 are under 30 years old, or who completed full-time education less than 5 years before 2008 Jan 1.

Rate 3 The standard rate: £90.00. For:

Fellows who on 2008 Jan 1 are aged 30 or over and who completed full time education more than 5 years ago.

Rate 4 The concessionary rate for older Fellows having historic rights: £nil. For:

Fellows who exercised their rights under Byelaw 38 before 2003 Jan 1.

Conditional reductions:

Rates 2 and 3 are reduced by 25% for Fellows who are also members of the Institute of Physics.

The DD/CPA discount: Rates 1, 2 and 3 are further reduced by £3 for Fellows who have already taken out a Direct Debit authority to charge Annual Contributions to Bank Accounts or a Continuous Payment Authority to charge credit cards, or who do so at the time of payment of the Annual Contribution.

Rate 2 is reduced by 50% in the first year for non-student Fellows who are newly elected to membership after the end of June.

Rate 1 is reduced to £1 in the first year of membership provided the newly-elected student Fellow takes out a Direct Debit authority to charge Annual Contributions to a Bank Account or a Continuous Payment Authority to charge a credit card at the time of election. (Note: the DD/CPA discount is applied after the first year).

Rate 2 is reduced by one third in the first year to which it applies to Fellows who transfer from Rate 1 to Rate 2 upon ceasing full time education, and to Fellows who are newly elected and eligible for Rate 2, provided the Fellow takes out or has earlier taken out a Direct Debit authority to charge Annual Contributions to a Bank Account or a Continuous Payment Authority to charge a credit card at the time of election. (Note: the DD/CPA discount is applied after the first year).

Rate 3 is reduced by one third in the first year to which it applies to Fellows who are newly elected in 2008 and who are not eligible for Rate 1 or for Rate 2 provided the newly-elected Fellow takes out a Direct Debit authority to charge Annual Contributions to a Bank Account or a Continuous Payment Authority to charge a credit card at the time of election. (Note: the DD/CPA discount is applied after the first year).

Reductions are applied in the order given. The Admission Fee remains at zero.

6.5 AGM 2007

The Executive Secretary reminded Council that it had agreed on a number of proposed changes to the bye-laws to be brought to the May 2007 AGM. He explained that further investigation had shown that the proposed formulation to Bye-law 2, to accommodate the wish to use the term 'honorary fellow' instead of 'associate', created unnecessary complications in that it could be implied that a new category of membership was being created. Such a change would necessitate a revision to the Charter. Accordingly, to avoid this, he asked for, and obtained, Council's agreement to a slight revision. He also suggested reducing the number of proposed changes to allow for electronic communications on the grounds that they were otiose. This was agreed. Finally, it was pointed out that to ensure consistency with the proposed change to Bye-law 1 Bye-law 41 would need to be amended. The net result of the agreed changes was as follows:

Bye-law 2 - replace 'The Society shall consist of Fellows and Associates, collectively referred to as Members, who shall have the privileges and obligations set out in the following Bye-laws'.

By

'The Society shall consist of Fellows and Associates (also known as Honorary Fellows), collectively referred to as Members, who shall have the privileges and obligations set out in the following Bye-laws'

Bye-law 41 – replace ' The Society may honour any person, eminent in the field of astronomy or geophysics, by election as an Associate of the Society. The election shall rest with the Council.'

By

'The Society may honour any person, eminent in the field of astronomy solar-system science, geophysics and closely related branches of science, by election as an Associate of the Society. The election shall rest with the Council.'

7. POLICY & PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

7.1 'Galileo'

The Geophysical Secretary spoke to a previously distributed paper outlining the arguments for making a Society response to the EC Green Paper. It was agreed that he would prepare a draft for electronic approval by Council noting the deadline of 6 April

7.2 European Research Programmes

The Geophysical Secretary spoke to a previously distributed paper outlining the scope of the recently launched 7th Framework Programme (FP7). Coincidentally, the Science and Technology Committee of the House of Commons had announced a review of the international activities of the research councils including UK participation in the Framework 7 initiative. It was agreed that Dr Hapgood and the Policy Officer should seek to stimulate a discussion in the 'Forum' linked to a (customised) description guide to FP7 on the RAS website, and in the light of this decide whether to submit evidence to the S&T Committee. It was also suggested that there should be an article in *A&G* explaining the opportunities open to the community in FP7.

7.3 European Radio Spectrum Policy

The Geophysical Secretary informed Council that, while OFCOM increasingly viewed the spectrum as a commercial asset, the EC had taken a more thoughtful position. That very day, a new system for licensing access to the spectrum had been launched. In the case of the UK scientific community, the associated costs would be borne by PPARC /OSI

8. PUBLICATIONS

8.1 Publications Management Committee

The Treasurer spoke to a previously distributed paper which reported the extremely good performance of MNRAS in 2006, and the rather less satisfactory results, in respect of impact factor and publication times, for GJI while noting, with

appreciation, the efforts being made by its Editor-in-chief, Professor Ebinger, to bring about improvements in both areas. It was agreed to ask Professor Ebinger, at the next meeting GJI Editorial Board in April, to consider producing a business plan to guide the development of the journal.

Council went on to accept the Treasurer's proposal that, in order to maximise readership of the journals, while still delivering adequate returns to the Society and the Publisher, the prices of all 3 RAS publications should increase in 2008 by a less - than - inflation rate of 2.5%.

Finally the President asked that Council devote part of the May meeting to a consideration of the impact on the Society of a significant reduction in journal income, such as might occur as a result of 'open access' developments.

9. OTHER

9.1 Candidates for Election

Council approved the following Candidates for Election to Fellowship listed in OR/03/07 and posted on the RAS web site.

Berkeley	Kimi
Fernandes	Cristina Andreia da Costa
James	Philip
King	Oliver
Knigge	Christian
McCarthy	Craig
McKay	Robert
Mirasola	Frank
Owen	Nicholas
Raftery	Claire
Roche	Paul
Schawinski	Kevin
Valkonen	Laura

9.2 The Minutes of the Anniversary Meeting of the Royal Astronomical Society of 9th February 2007 were approved and signed

10. AOB

10.1 Council was reminded that the Society had been allocated its usual 4 tickets for the 2007 Buckingham Palace Garden Parties. Councillors wishing to attend were invited to contact the Executive Secretary

10.2 Professor Robson reported the outcome of a meeting, in Garching, concerning the International Year of Astronomy 2009. A logo and 'strap-line' had been agreed; a web site was now live and some 63 countries had established national organisers.

Council rose at 1650

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M. Rowan-Robinson
President

11th May 2007