

ASTRONOMY FORUM (AT NAM2010): NOTES FROM 15TH APRIL 2010

1. In attendance: Forum members (including Andy Fabian as chair); Roger Davies (Oxford), Paul Crowther (Sheffield), George Efstathiou (Cambridge), Carlos Frenk (Durham), Bob Nichol (Portsmouth), Martin Barstow (Leicester), Mike Merrifield (Nottingham), Jim Hough (Herts), Mark Bailey (Armagh), Keith Horne (St Andrews), Mark Lester (Leicester), Martin Ward (Durham), Gordon Bromage (UCLan), Coel Hellier (Keele), Martin Hendry (Glasgow), Ralph Spencer (Manchester), Bob Nichol (Portsmouth), Don Pollacco (Queen's), Jon Loveday (Sussex), Derek Ward-Thompson (Cardiff), Andy Lawrence (Edinburgh), Terry O'Connor (STFC, TOC), John Womersley (STFC, JW), Richard Wade (STFC, RW), Robert Massey (RAS), David Elliott (RAS)
2. The Chair opened the meeting at 12.30 p.m. He welcomed Forum members to NAM 2010 and to Glasgow and set out the business for the meeting, including a response to the forthcoming Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR – with an STFC presentation on work done to date), VISTA and the future of the Forum after he steps down as RAS President.
3. Richard Wade opened the first substantive item, discussing the preparation by STFC for the coming CSR due to come into effect in 2011.

He explained how STFC Council will take an active role, has set up a subgroup to concentrate on this area and aims to inform presentations to the Government in September, but that they are planning to be ready before then.

The Drayson review outcome shifts the paradigm for STFC funding, in particular in how it changes the partitioning of the budget. Work at STFC focuses on the 'bit in the middle' i.e. the exploitation grants and contributions of particle physics and astronomy facilities to physics in universities.

The Government has already asked STFC a series of question about the CSR bid (Terry O'Connor pointed out that scientists lead the advice on the bid). The community can help here by putting out very positive messages about science in the period after the election.

Finally, he explained that further cuts to the STFC budget would still have a disproportionate impact on grants.

A wide-ranging discussion followed. Questions and points and responses follow:

- *Postdoc numbers are now below the level they were at in 2000 and support per academic is even lower, at the level of that year.*
- *Has anything new been funded in the last 3 years?*

- JW: There has not been high investment in new projects, but a good example is LOFAR.
- BIS might argue that there should be fewer physics departments and we need convincing arguments to counter this idea.
- The community should not expect projects that fall below the line for funding to be restarted.
- We should (partly) argue for funding on the basis of improving STEM skills from physics and think about how astronomy and particle physics can help solve big problems identified by the Government.
- *We should be at least matching the investment made by other competitor nations.*
- RW: BIS have done work on this and see the lower expenditure as demonstrating higher efficiency.
- We prefer to argue that the impact on the science base (of investment or cuts) is the important consideration.
- *The RCUK review of physics panel struggled to get adequate data to sensibly compare UK investment with that in other countries.*
- JW: International comparisons are not always helpful. For example, France and Germany spend three times as much as the UK on nuclear physics support staff, but that might support the 'UK is more efficient' argument and be seen as a good thing.
- *We can compare the number of physicists with GDP figures for different nations. This shows that the number in the UK has stagnated despite growth elsewhere.*
- *The IoP surveyed around 75% of physics undergraduates. The bulk of them cited astronomy and particle physics as a key reason for choosing to study physics.*
- *STFC should consult the Astronomy Forum for ideas on promoting our research to the Government.*
- JW: STFC have a standing invitation to the Forum so can certainly do this.
- TOC: The sub-group of STFC Council meets next week. It is hard to consult with the wider community on the expected very short timescale that we will have for our response after the election. There will be potentially more than 300 new MPs and we need to get in touch with them very quickly.
- *What about the UK Space Agency?*

- JW: The UK Space Agency will make a separate CSR bid and will have a space science advisory committee. [*FUAP and NUAP are making separate reports for this*].
4. Richard Wade then gave a presentation on the future of VISTA and negotiations with the European Southern Observatory. Following an extended discussion, there was a general consensus in support of the STFC approach in this matter, provided it did not further damage the grants line.
 5. The Chair explained to the Forum that his term of office as RAS President would end in the middle of May and that he would be succeeded by Roger Davies. Although the Forum is not an RAS body, it receives support from the Society and therefore he suggested that it is important to maintain the link between the two. This can be done effectively by asking future RAS Presidents to become chairs of the Forum. In the event that a future President has a background in solid-Earth geophysics, the role of Forum chair could then be taken by a vice-President specialising in astronomy research. This was supported by those present.
 6. The Chair closed the meeting at 2 p.m.