

Astronomy Forum, 6 Feb 2020

1. Welcome and election of chair (all)

The Forum agreed to elect RAS President-elect Professor Emma Bunce as chair until the end of her term of office.

2. Update on political engagement (all)

- The RAS Deputy Executive Director attended the learned societies' Parliamentary Affairs Committee: met Rt. Hon. Greg Clark MP, the new chair of the Commons Science and Technology select committee
- Leicester University: Prof Bunce attended the ceremony opening Space Park Leicester with the then Science Minister Chris Skidmore MP. Leicester West MP Liz Kendall was present too and interested in engaging with the space community

3. RAS Policy Group (Robert Massey, RAS)

Slides from this presentation are available [here](#).

- 72 RAS Fellows have signed up to the new Policy Group, from diverse occupations and career stages
- A subset of the Group met, along with representatives from SpaceX and OneWeb, to discuss satellite mega-constellations, trying to develop unified message to inform international standards and a potential regulatory framework

Would be useful to input to UKRI on immigration (RM agreed)

4. Highlights and status report from STFC (Professor Mark Thomson, Executive Chair, Science and Technology Facilities Council)

Slides from this presentation are available [here](#).

Discussion points:

- Consolidated grants: large awards allow departments to put in proposals for larger projects, or move around funding even across departments or universities (e.g. particle physics). More useful to whole community - different communities have different needs, and this allows that. Further discussion needed as to specific details of how smaller project proposals are put forward in that context and in other areas e.g. astronomy, nuclear physics.
- Immigration policies - Global Talent Visa covers senior positions, doesn't seem to cover unnamed PDRAs, new lecturers etc? Are we communicating the need for these positions?

Discussion is happening through UKRI.

- Will transition to new grant balance scheme take into account the three year cycle, i.e. not happen before current one ends?

Will have to be rolled out over long period, so there may be interim measures to gradually move to new system.

Future Leader Fellows are eligible, so there are opportunities to get PDRA support through this route.

Total number of Future Leader Fellows depends on demand and individual panel decisions. Latest round was possibly the largest, another two rounds to come (June, November / December), with possibility of extension depending on outcome of government spending review.

- Government is proposing a new ARPA-style funding agency for high-risk/high-gain projects. What relation would that have to UKRI?

Currently unknown - would be independent, could be a charity. Shouldn't detract from UKRI however.

- Participation in AstroNet has been important to UK community. How will this be affected and what would government do if UK doesn't associate with Horizon programme? Is there anything the RAS could do?

AstroNet is now independent, has no funding from EU. Something would have to be put in place to replace Horizon, with a number of options suggested in [Smith and Reid report](#). Would be a high-level political decision, but could start consulting community on options once a particular direction emerges.

5. Update from the STFC Astronomy Advisory Panel (Stephen Serjeant, OU)

Slides from the presentation are available [here](#).

Discussion points:

- Note that GOTO was funded in full.
- STFC Priority Call - was unclear how community should be responding, process and outcomes unclear. More information and clarity from STFC would have been helpful.

New pots of money were being formed, STFC had outlines only, and were seeking broad projects to try to align to potential new funds.

- X-ray community fragmented, the constant calls for input from STFC are overwhelming
- How do outcomes from SSAP fit in?

There was a joint meeting with SSAP and particle astrophysics, discussions are happening.

6. 2019 Astronomy Grants Round (Jim Wild)

Slides from the presentation are available [here](#).

Discussion points:

- Has percentage of estates and indirect costs changed?

It has generally gone up, but large variation between universities. At last assessment, rising Estates and Indirect costs are equivalent to 1 additional PDRA post per year. Universities are regulated and audited though, so can't charge exorbitant costs. Estates and Indirect costs are not assessed by the panel.

- Suggestion that is considered in auditing of PIs – departments have been asked about what PI spends, not about estate costs of universities
- How does astronomy compare with particle physics? Average number of postdocs in astronomy awards is 2.6

It's different in particle physics - groups are fixed, need big facilities, growth is constrained, so can't make direct comparison.

- Do you expect any changes in rules asking for computing equipment?

No.

- Are pathways to impact going to change?

Yes, they will exist in a different form - based on a written statement of impact. Further guidance will be forthcoming.

7. Any other business

- RAS is working to create an Early Careers Network - invitations are forthcoming.
- RAS Harassment Survey is forthcoming, results will be announced at NAM.
- Suggestion from Sussex that the RAS does a collective PhD advert for UK universities or national directory

RAS relies on the community for PhD studentships, and isn't in a position to maintain the actual data, deal with applications etc. Society would be willing to share material if it's community-maintained though, e.g. in a Google doc updated by community, or potentially hosting a consistent set of links to information on a dedicated RAS webpage.

- What will happen to student fees for international students?

This is a matter for individual universities. Would be a huge loss if community couldn't use STFC funds for EU postgraduate students.

- Next Astronomy Forum to be arranged in due course, but there will be the usual community session at NAM in Bath.