



*Advancing
Astronomy and
Geophysics*

ROYAL ASTRONOMICAL SOCIETY

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MINUTES OF THE COUNCIL MEETING OF 12 OCTOBER 2006 HELD AT 1300 IN THE COUNCIL ROOM AT 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, Professor I.D. Howarth and Dr H. J. Walker (Secretaries), Professor M.E. Bailey, Dr A.J. Ball, Professor A.M. Cruise, Professor T.W. Hartquist, Dr J. Mitton, Mr I.W. Ridpath, Professor E.I. Robson, Professor M.J. Rycroft and Professor I.P. Wright

APOLOGIES: Professor D. Gubbins (Vice-President), Professor M.A. Barstow, Dr L. Fletcher and Professor J.H. Hough.

IN ATTENDANCE: D Elliott

2. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting of 18 September 2006 were approved and signed without amendment

3. MATTERS ARISING

3.1 International Perceptions of UK Research in Physics and Astronomy Report

The Geophysical Secretary reported that broad terms of reference had been agreed for the Review of Graduate Education and Training recommended in the Report viz to review the length and breadth of UK PhD training, and the mobility and career paths of UK Post Doctoral Research Assistants (PDRAs) compared to European analogues. SRL Consulting Ltd had been invited to prepare a detailed project proposal to undertake studies which would, firstly, compare the key differences in the training of UK PhD graduates with their international counterparts and, secondly, identify the perceived barriers that limit the international mobility and career prospects of UK PDRAs. The review, which it is planned will occur in 2008 following the Research Assessment Exercise, would be jointly funded by EPSRC, PPARC, IoP and the Society (and possibly the Office of Science and Innovation, OSI). The Geophysical Secretary added that he was somewhat concerned that the PhD issues could be given

less attention than PDRAs' and that this would need to be watched.

3.2 New 'G' Award for Geophysical Instrumentation

The Geophysical Secretary reported that he was in discussion with a consultancy company, which may be interested in financing the award for an initial period of several years. Pending further exchanges he hoped to bring a more definite proposal to Council in December and was mindful that it would be necessary to amend the by-laws at the May 2007 AGM.

4. PRESIDENT'S BUSINESS

4.1 Meeting with CEO of CCLRC

The President reported on his meeting with Professor John Wood, Chief Executive Officer of the CCLRC, to discuss its proposed merger with PPARC. The enabling proposal to effect this would be presented to Parliament on 14 November 2006. It was important that the Society's concerns were communicated before the new Council's structure and remit was finalised. The President was informed that its provisional name would be the Science Facilities Research Council; that its CEO was yet to be appointed; that the membership of the Council would be smaller than the present arrangements with equal representation by academe and industry and that its charter, which was being decided by a group in the OSI, would avoid placing unnecessary restrictions on its operations (adding that 'blue-skies' research, probably, would be neither prescribed or proscribed).

The President added that he had been informed that 'rolling grants' would continue; that there would be 4-5 science committees to advise the Council; that it was likely that the new Council would have to absorb currency and other fluctuations affecting its membership of international organisations and projects, and that this could put the grants line at risk; that allocations would continue to be made following peer review except in the case of large facilities where recommendation would be made by specialist international groups; that Professor Wood's preference would be to hive off space instrumentation groups (which account for some 350 out of the 1800 people employed by CCLRC) to compete for projects with university and other based groups; that 'Innovation Campuses' were a major focus and finally that planning was underway to establish a National Graduate School for Space Science, based at RAL. The President had raised the question of training accounts for students; Professor Wood was not sure they would not disadvantage researchers working in smaller groups and asked for evidence that the community at large supported them.

The President intended to write to the DG of the Research Councils, Sir Keith O'Nions, in advance of his meeting with him on December 6 2006. Among other points he would emphasise that the design of the new Council should be based around the symbiotic relationship it needed to have with UK universities and that any risk to the grants line, or rather to the ability to exploit the results generated by facilities, would damage UK science and its standing in the world (as well as jeopardise the survival of even more physics departments).

4.2 'Making the Case for Space'

The President had attended the launch of a booklet 'Making the Case for Space' compiled by the UK space lobby, particularly EADS Astrium, to persuade the Treasury in the next CSR to increase, albeit modestly, public funding for what was one of the UK's most successful industries. The 'Case' demonstrated that Space was

a major employer with a high rate of return per worker and a high (12%) rate of reinvestment of turnover in R&D; its applications were crucial to topics such as climate change and telecommunications; and it had a significant impact on science education.

The Society, said the President, needed to build on this in making the ‘Case for Astronomy’, an important task of the new Policy Officer post, adding that it had been made clear that HMG had set its face against establishing an independent Space Agency; equally its opposition to UK involvement in human space exploration remained undimmed.

5. BURLINGTON HOUSE

5.1 Construction Contract

The Executive Secretary reminded Council that, at the meeting on July 29 2006, it had agreed that the existing specifications should be used to prepare tender documents for potential contractors, subject to the requirement that the cost of the project must be contained within a ceiling of £2.55m. Within this total, buildings work was calculated at £1,483,100 (July 2006 prices excluding VAT and inflation over the 12 month projected period of the project). Subsequent to that meeting further work on the design had led to a downward revision to a new target figure of £1,356,000 (with the same exclusions). Invitations to tender had been sent and received from 7 contractors and their prices ranged from £1,149,479 to £1,613,710, with duration of works varying from 26 to 58 ‘working weeks’.

On the basis of the analysis of the proposals by the consultants it was decided to interview on 10 October 2006 the 3 companies with the lowest tender prices. The interview panel consisted of Peregrine Bryant (lead consultant and architect); his assistant, Athina Katsanou; Brian Cohen (Quantity Surveyor); Clive Dawson (Structural Surveyor) and the Executive Secretary. The panel reached the unanimous decision that the contract should be placed with Crispin and Borst since they fully met the professional criteria for a considerably lower sum than any other proposal viz £1,149,479 including inflation but excluding VAT.

The Executive Secretary confirmed that, compared to the July budget, this represented a reduction of c. £440,000. However taking into account their extremely competitive price, the consultants had suggested ‘mentally reserving’ as an additional contingency a further £125,000. The Treasurer intervened to say that he recommended that the July budget should be left unchanged at this stage since it could be imprudent to spend ‘savings’ before the project has been completed. He added, though, that there was every likelihood that more resources could be made available to support the President’s Action Plan.

With the request that the membership, through ‘A&G’, should be given details of the refurbishment Council instructed the Executive Secretary to authorize the Lead Consultant to send a letter of intent forthwith to enter into a contract with Crispin and Borst with a view to their commencing work on November 13 2006.

5.2 Move to Hallam Court

The Executive Secretary informed Council that a licence has been given by the Institute of Materials, Minerals & Mining to allow the RAS to occupy their leased

premises at Hallam Court , 77 Hallam St, for a period of 12 months from November 1 for an annual charge of £ 40,000. He added that, by separate agreement the BAA would occupy c. 25% of the space, and pay 25% of the annual charge.

It was planned that staff would leave Burlington House on 27 October and that operations would resume in Hallam Court on 1 November. The costs of removing, and in the case of art works storing, and then returning the contents of Burlington House was expected to total some £90,000 (£60,000 less than earlier estimates). Committee meetings could be accommodated but Council meetings would, as advised, be held in the Royal Society of Chemistry.

5.3 ‘Cultural Campus’

The Executive Secretary reported on the meeting he attended to scope this concept. It had been agreed to proceed slowly and gradually build up the public outreach profile of the courtyard by ‘branding’ appropriate events already scheduled by individual societies and by creating a new web site. Planned events included a lecture on Sir Joseph Banks and a joint Royal Academy Society of Antiquaries exhibition. The Executive Secretary had volunteered the suggestion of a joint Society/Antiquaries event on archeo-astronomy. Only when there was a demonstrable record of achievement, it was felt, would it be possible to apply with any degree of success for the external finance needed to produce a step change in activities through funding a dedicated appointment.

6. ORGANISATION AND STRUCTURE

6.1 Scientific Groups Committee

The President reported on the inaugural meeting of this committee comprising currently, 8 (though only 7 were represented at the meeting) topic groups with a combined, though overlapping, membership of c.1,000. It was especially encouraging that several of them were the creations of early career scientists. The groups were keen to have stronger links with the Society providing it continued to develop its role as the voice of the professional community. To facilitate networking, it had been decided to produce a web page on the Society web site with appropriate links. In addition, groups had been encouraged to apply for Society grants to assist their activities. A further meeting, which would have a scientific agenda, would be held during the NAM in Preston.

6.2 CwiAG

The ‘A’ Secretary, Dr Walker, spoke to a paper which had been laid on the table summarising the meeting of the Committee for Women in Astronomy and Geophysics (CwiAG). She planned to investigate the demand for organising a women’s lunch for geophysicists during the BGA 2-day meeting in February 2007 to parallel the similar event which was held annually at the NAM. Dr Walker also mentioned that she had attended a Women in Physics meeting at the IoP ; in addition to their difficulties in finding a career position alongside their partners’ many women were faced with a ‘three-body’ problem in the form of aging parents. Finally, Dr Walker asked that more use could be made of role models to encourage the nomination of women for election to Council, membership of the IAU and for Society awards.

6.3 Education Committee

The Executive Secretary introduced the previously distributed paper summarising the proposed education strategy which, subject to Council's views, would be costed and presented by the Chair of the Education Committee at the December meeting. Council warmly endorsed the proposals which were designed to enhance the Society's contribution to the teaching and learning of astronomy in schools and the wider community. It was important not to replicate existing resources but to exploit the subject's inherent attractiveness. Ensuring that existing and new education materials were prominently advertised on the web site and were available in HTML as well as PDF formats could do this. It was important that search engines directed surfers to our site, which could also host a directory of post-graduate and post-doctoral students willing to give school talks. Finally, it was stressed that the Society should work in partnership with PPARC, IoP and other appropriate bodies.

6.4 Library Committee

The Chair of the Library Committee, Ian Ridpath, introduced the committee's report which showed that out of the £53,500 budget for 2006, some £48,542 had been spent or committed. He noted that the Society's materials loaned to Compton Verney for the 'Starry Messenger' exhibition had been safely returned, though shared the misgivings of some members of Council who had seen it, about the scientific value of this event. He also advised Council that it was important to maintain a photographic record of past Presidents and of the Society's art works.

7. REVIEWS

7.1 Space Policy

Professor Cruise spoke to his revised paper which was to be submitted to the Science and Technology Committee of the House of Commons. He noted that the key issue which Council needed to decide was whether to argue for the creation of a National Space Agency in place of the BNSC, together with a dedicated budget or, knowing the government's opposition to this, focus instead on desired outcomes, especially better coordination of activities and training. After discussion it was agreed to amend the submission to read ...

'The solution to the structural problem of the BNSC has to be taken on by those fully aware of the conflicting requirements. The lack of any independent Space Council makes it especially difficult to formulate an informed and effective proposal. It is the view of the RAS that the current format is not serving the needs of the country nor the space community. The merger between CCLRC and PPARC into the Large Facilities Council may provide the opportunity to reform BNSC into a new, technically aware guiding structure for space in the UK, possibly an independent UK Space Agency. Its form and its relationships with other bodies such as NERC should be carefully considered by the newly reconstituted UK Space Council as one of its first tasks. The RAS would welcome participation in any discussions of this possibility'.

It was also agreed to indicate to the Science and Technology Committee that the Society would welcome the opportunity of appearing before it.

7.2 UK Honours degree

The President informed Council that Professor Hough, with the full approval of

Professor Bromage, had agreed to take over the Chair of the Higher Education Committee. Its first task had been to respond to an invitation from ‘Universities UK’ to comment on the proposals contained in the ‘Burgess Group consultation document’. This recommended that the present classification of honours degrees should be changed to a simple pass/fail combined with a detailed transcript of the graduate’s performance. HedComm suggested that the Society should oppose the first and support the second of these proposals. Council agreed that this was the only possible position for a learned society and requested Professor Hough to write and submit a reasoned submission explaining this.

8. PUBLICATIONS

8.1 The Treasurer introduced the previously distributed paper outlining the proposed agreement with Springer. He highlighted that books would be ‘badged’ as ‘The Royal Astronomical Society Series’ (though they would actually appear in one or other of existing Springer series) and would attempt to exploit areas where the Society could add value and fill empty niches. The publications process would be shared by the Society and Springer viz the Society would appoint a Commissioning Editor to seek out potential books, organise proposal evaluation and peer review while Springer would assess their commercial viability and seek the agreement of the appropriate series editor. Thereafter the Society would enter into a contract with the author on the one hand and Springer on the other. The latter would be on the basis that the Society received a royalty of 15% on book sales from which it would pay commissioning editor and referee expenses; payment to editors/authors would be either by a royalty share or other agreement. As books would be published at the publisher’s expense, there would be minimal financial risk to the Society, at most a few hundred pounds for costs incurred in unsuccessful proposals. Indeed the business plan assumed that the Society would generate income from this venture. Finally the Treasurer added that the first 2 books are in an advanced stage of preparation and asked Council to authorise himself and the Executive Secretary to sign the agreement with Springer.

Council agreed to this though noted that the Society would have no control over pricing, a source of some concern given Springer’s reputation for high prices. It was also noted that by eschewing the option of creating a new, discrete ‘RAS series’ the Society was being led by Springer’s commercial judgement that this would optimise sales.

9. OTHER

9.1 *Candidates for Election:* Council approved the following Candidates for Election to Fellowship listed in OR/09/06 & OR/10/06 and posted on the RAS web site.

Attrill	Gemma
Benstead	James
Morgan	Geraint H.
Mullin	Laura
Parkinson	David
Russell	Sally E.
Scott	Robert Samuel
Sheerin	Fintan Killian

9.2 Minutes of the Monthly A&G (Open) Meeting for Friday 12th May 2006 –
These were approved without amendment.

10. AOB

10.1 The President informed Council that it had been brought to his attention that school teachers were being targeted by ‘creationists’ and, in some cases, were allowing their pupils to suppose that creationism represented an alternative, scientific, explanation of the origins of the universe some few thousands of years ago. Council agreed that it was important that the Society should counter this, not by having what would be ‘dialogues of the deaf’ with the advocates of creationism or ‘Intelligent Design’ but, through the Society web site, by informing teachers of the actual age of the universe and of the evidence on which this was based. The President volunteered to do this.

10.2 The President informed Council that, shortly, they would receive instructions to participate in a pilot test of the electronic voting system being developed by the Society web team for possible adoption in future Council elections.

10.3 Mr Ridpath suggested that the RAS logo, except when used on letterheads, could be more eye-catching by embossing or the use of colour and volunteered to bring suggestions to the next meeting.

10.4 The President thanked Dr Mitton for producing the 2007 RAS Diary. Dr Mitton requested feed back on the lay-out and contents and noted that the next diary, as agreed, would run for 15 months to coincide with the academic year starting in October 2007.

10.5 Finally, the President reiterated that, owing to cost considerations, during the removal to Hallam Court it would not be possible to hold post-meetings receptions

Council rose at 1700

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M. Rowan-Robinson
President

8th December 2006