

Astronomy Forum notes 23 May 2022

The Astronomy Forum met at the Royal Astronomical Society (RAS) on 23 May 2022, with some attendees joining virtually.

1. Election of chair

Prof. Mike Edmunds became President of the RAS at the Society AGM on 13 May. Those present elected him as Chair of the Astronomy Forum for the duration of his term of office.

2. Update on political engagement

Deputy Executive Director Dr Robert Massey gave an update on Society public policy work in areas including the impact of satellite constellations on astronomy, the new RAS sustainability policy and commitment to Climate Neutral Now, diversity policy, Horizon Europe (principally via CaSE and the Science Council), support for the APPG on Dark Skies, and the recent bicentenary reception in Westminster.

Prof. Mike Merrifield (Nottingham) noted that Starlink is no longer using the VisorSat system and will send the details to RM.

3. Update from the Science and Technology Facilities Council (Prof. Mark Thomson)

Prof. Mark Thomson, STFC CEO, gave a presentation on STFC work and policy issues. The slides were circulated to Forum members after the meeting and are available [here](#).

Points raised in the ensuing discussion included:

- STFC documents should explicitly mention diversity – evidence to the Commons Science and Technology Committee flagged weaknesses in UKRI approach
- Ongoing uncertainty around association to Horizon Europe means EU applicants don't want UK partners on team
- Replacement (for Horizon) won't support international collaboration in the same way
- Horizon – please continue to apply despite challenges, need this to demonstrate value. BEIS is leading a plan B if required.
- Issues are that EU partners don't want UK applicants on team, even as partner rather than leader
- Replacement won't support international collaboration in the same way, and budget negotiations won't start because of uncertainty.

MT – this shouldn't be the case for the UK side, with the underwrite in place

- Would alternative include UK funds supporting European scientists?

MT – looking at a range of measures in BEIS

- Has anyone taken up underwrite funds?

MT – underwrite has been used already

(ME) What can we do about this?

MT – EU partners want us to associate, but this is tied up with broader negotiations on e.g. Northern Ireland protocol, primarily by European Commission. Could ask international partners to help lobbying effort, e.g. European Astronomical Society [RM to action this]

- Can we associate to parts of Horizon and not others?

MT – there are parts UK is not associated with, but in general this would be very difficult

- How is Ukraine war affecting collaboration with Russia?

MT - sanctions against state, individuals and organisations with links to Kremlin, but not individual scientists or innovators with benign research interests

- Astronomy is affected by delay to Euclid

MT – (Dr) Caroline Harper (UK Space Agency, following speaker) best placed to comment on this

ME described RAS position – strong view there should be support for Ukrainian scientists and others affected by war, Prof. John Zarnecki acting as liaison for this [John’s details circulated to RAS Fellows, including Forum members]

- What will scope of RAS action be?

ME – this is open at the moment

- On consolidated grants – EPSRC model for demand management pretty draconian, would be even worse in astronomy

Colin Vincent (STFC) – not looking at this model, but NERC model, so might be able to apply the following year after a failed bid, but not necessarily

- JC: do we get sight of this before 13 June town meeting?

CV – can do this

- Commitment to UK contribution to Horizon until end of FY 2024/25, but not beyond at the moment
- How does this compare with previous investment and return?

MT: contribution now in BEIS budget rather than being direct payment from Treasury

- *Note restriction on return as part of Trade and Cooperation Agreement (see https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/research_and_innovation/strategy_on_research_and_innovation/documents/ec_rtd_uk-participation-in-horizon-europe.pdf)*
- *Scientists can bid for as much as they like beyond contribution, but UK may have to pay more, or successful bids aren't supported*
- *Seems like nothing ever changes re resources... What is STFC electricity bill?*

MT - £21m, procured via cross-government consortium

- *Will groups funded in 2022/23 benefit from new arrangement for grants?*

MT - Some of them, hope that increase is sustained. Expect to see noticeable increase in core resource funding – not business as usual. Also expect spending review allocations very soon – STFC in a reasonably good place

- *Timing of consolidated grants important, in particle physics gap between notification and start of grant a lot longer than in astronomy, led to no cost extensions being granted. Is this something we can explore – longer grants?*

CV: longer grants tie funds to particular projects for longer, new scheme will have more options, will see if we can offer longer than 3 year awards

- *Review panel for CG setup was told would be no longer than 3 years*
- *MT: no reason this can't be done, risk is it goes beyond spending review period, but we manage this situation a lot*
- *RO: what is difference in asking for different numbers of postdocs in one grant, or one in a number of grants?*

CV: no obvious advantage, try to minimise gameplaying in applications

- *How are studentships and fellowships – any expectation of growth in numbers?*

MT: Discussion across UKRI, will review this

- *In scientific publishing, authors in some institutions (Queen Mary) not able to publish open access papers in MNRAS, as QMUL is not affiliated to JISC*

CV suggested people feed in individual cases, note that UKRI sets policy

4. Update from the UK Space Agency (Dr Caroline Harper)

Dr Caroline Harper, Head of Space Science at the UK Space Agency, gave an update on its activities and prospects for the years ahead. The slides from this presentation were circulated to members of the Forum after the meeting and are available [here](#).

Forum members raised the following points in response:

- As a member of Athena team, news of budget hit from ESA is a huge shock, potentially very damaging for the UK science community, more than 100 people involved across 10 institutions, very harmful for sustainability of X-ray astronomy in UK

CH: very aware of this, will be raising this at ESA meeting, news was dropped on us too, we did an exercise on improving financial management at ESA last year so wanted to avoid this kind of surprise, and could have reached a different outcome

- Shock is difference between March and now, important to say this is not the fault of UK instrument team, ESA top down approach is not helpful, we have UK Athena meeting this Friday, and PI is coming, so will be interested to hear his views

CH: ESA is committed to working with delegations to find a solution, open to other options

- When these kind of things come up, what are lines of communication with astronomical community, to mobilise support and set priorities?

CH: UKSA doesn't pick favourite missions, STFC holds strategy for science, historically sought input and endorsement from Science Board before investment is made in missions, when these issues arise we talk to our advisory committee (meeting this Wednesday), may invite committee members to speak more widely

- People in my institution happy with level of grants and support, but profile of awards is a real headache, a year's funding not good enough

CH: this is a headache for UKSA too, understand issues for projects, procurement, we welcome three year spending review, waiting for ministerial signoff on allocations between different agency teams, once my director has letter of delegation we will get grants out of the door, hope to get three year grants out to teams from now on

- I have 20 staff on PLATO and GAIA, some will be at Goonhilly, we don't have a grant for them since 1 April, but we are paying their salaries, which is a violation of research concordat. Existing grants a big issue here

CH: continuation of grants an issue – understood

- Staff are going to Goonhilly, we won't have a grant for them yet, need to understand they are real people!
- STFC grants seem to be issued in time despite one year spending settlement

CV: agreement with BEIS allows business as usual, so grants awarded even if beyond one year settlement

CH: we are trying to make business as usual case, at least three year continuity of funding will help

Any other business

Danny Steen (Warwick): hopes to see a large part of community at NAM, asked groups to settle abstracts and register for conference

RM offered to help in promotion of scientific results presented there