Frontiers of astronomy

Martin Barstow and Pat Russell review the third RAS Student Conference held in Leicester on 8 April.

The purpose of the RAS-sponsored student conference entitled “Frontiers of astronomy” was to encourage young people to take up astronomy and geophysics. In contrast to the previous events, which were aimed mainly at undergraduates, this third conference targeted sixth-form and able GCSE students at a time when they decide what AS/A2 or university courses to follow in the future.

The one-day meeting was organized by Martin Barstow and Pat Russell (University of Leicester). We were overwhelmed by the level of interest, with 190 people (including 15 teachers) attending from 12 different colleges. This forced us to revise plans to hold the entire event at the National Space Centre and transfer the lectures to a larger lecture theatre on the main university site. We believe that holding the event in the last week of the school term is the reason for the enhanced take-up compared to past years.

The conference programme consisted of a session of lectures held at the university followed by a visit to the National Space Centre, which included a showing of the SETI Space Theatre show. Although the date clashed with the National Astronomy Meeting, we were able to provide a vibrant series of talks covering topics including: Cosmology (Katherine Blundell, Oxford), Cassini-Huygens (Carl Murray, Queen Mary College). The universe in full colour (Bob Warwick, Leicester), Solar and space plasma physics (Terry Robinson, Leicester). In addition, we held a careers seminar with the speakers and post-doctoral and postgraduate staff from Leicester. This was an “Any Questions” session giving advice on AS/A2 choices, undergraduate degree choices and career prospects.

All the conference delegates were given a short questionnaire about all aspects of the conference. The response was overwhelmingly positive but with a few constructive criticisms that could be used to improve any future similar events. A few students thought the 45-minute lectures should be shorter and the careers seminar would have been improved by some formal introductory information.

One specific comment reflected the general feeling of the participants: “I thought the presentations were very high quality, there was a good variety of topics covered and the speakers demonstrated a clear interest in their subject.”

The event cost students £6 each, including entry to the Space Centre, plus transport. We asked all participants what cost they might be willing to bear in future. It was clear that the RAS sponsorship (~£2.50 per student, covering speakers’ expenses, secretarial support, mailings and AV facilities), was crucial in keeping the overall cost to students within acceptable limits.

Overall, the event was a tremendous success and there is a clear demand for similar conferences in the future. However, their future viability will depend on sponsorship and we would encourage the RAS to maintain its important role in encouraging students to undertake their higher education in astronomy and geophysics.

RAS grant success

The majority of the applications to the RAS for research grants this year were successful, reports Ian Howarth.

Ten awards were made in response to 16 applications assessed in the February 2003 Royal Astronomical Society grants round. As previously, applications were assessed both for scientific merit and for their relevance to the RAS aim of promoting and encouraging astronomy and geophysics.

The awards fully funded four summer internships, provided support for three international conferences and contributed to three broadly “educational” projects. Awards were made at the level of approximately one third of the funds requested, with much of the over-subscription being addressed by reduced awards for travel support.

A further round of awards will be made in response to applications received at Burlington House by 1 August 2003. Further details can be found from Burlington House or on the RAS website (www.ras.org.uk/htmlr拉斯/grants/html).

A note on retirement

On Friday 13 June this year I retire from the appointment of Executive Secretary. This will be a day of considerable sadness for me for it will mark the end of what has been a particularly rewarding and satisfying period of my life. The last 12 years have passed quickly and I suppose that this is an indication of how much one has enjoyed the work. I have had considerable job satisfaction in this appointment and have been particularly fortunate in working at Burlington House. But I will not miss catching the 8:10 each morning into Waterloo, nor will I miss writing Council minutes! I have been sent a poem that sums it up: I’m used to my arthritis To my dentures I’m resigned I can cope with my bi-focals But Oh God I miss my mind!

Over the past 12 years I have noticed a considerable change in the Society. Above all there is now a noticeable vitality and drive, not because of me I hasten to add, but a change which has stemmed from the greater and wider involvement and interest in Society activities and its well-being, by the Fellows. The Society has a stability, a great sense of purpose and much of this is due to those I have had the privilege of working with, both Fellows and staff. This progress now includes an increasingly active – and growing! – role in the scientific community, the recognized need to have a healthy recruitment, particularly of the younger scientists, for in such recruitment lies the future of the Society and, importantly, an acceptance by all to live within the Society’s means. The Society is a vehicle for world-leading scientists, for front-line publications and for sponsoring gatherings and meetings not matched elsewhere.

Of course, the question of the future occupancy at Burlington House awaits resolution once and for all; it is a long-term problem, going on for some 40 years. It comes and goes, but its outcome will not affect the Society’s purpose, nor will it affect the life of the Society to any great extent. It would not be fitting if I did not pay tribute to my fellow members of staff at Burlington House. I have been most fortunate in being able to work with a group of people who have given me every support during the time of my appointment. They are a cheerful, willing team who, I am sure, will give the same support to my successor, David Elliott.

In closing I would like to thank – most sincerely – the successive groups of Officers and Council members for helping me in my appointment and contributing so much to the enjoyment I have had working for the Society. It has been a privilege and pleasure to work with such people during what I think has been a great period of progress. I believe the Society to be in good shape because it is truly in the hands of its Fellows. I wish the Society and the Fellowship good health.

John Lane, RAS Executive Secretary 1991–2003.

The 14th Annual RAS Picnic

Quentin Stanley announces the annual al-fresco get-together.

The Annual RAS picnic is to be held on Sunday 27 July 2003, near the Old Royal Observatory, Greenwich. Please meet at 12.30 by the Wolfe Statue, which is just by the main entrance to the Observatory. Late arrivals should look east of the Wolfe Statue for the RAS pennant. Please bring sandwiches, drinks, ground cover, etc. There are pay-and-display car parks nearby.

After the picnic, we hope for kite-flying/bugging demonstrations on Blackheath as well as other diversions to be announced on the website (www.raspicnic.tk). All Fellows and guests are welcome. If you are attending, please email so we can look out for you. If you have any queries, please contact Dr Q Stanley (q@bpsresearch.com or 01634 849934) or David Lally (davelally@another.com or 020 7735 3819).

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