

## **AAO ADVISORY COMMITTEE PUBLIC UPDATE**

**Meeting held 16-17 March 2011**

The AAOAC held its inaugural meeting on 16-17 March 2011, spending the first day at the AAO's Epping headquarters, and the second day visiting its telescope facilities at Siding Spring Observatory. This report summarises the main items of advice that the AAOAC has to offer the Secretary and the AAO Director from its meeting.

### **Relocation of the AAO Sydney premises**

The Committee considers it essential that steps be taken to maintain strong science links between AAO and CSIRO Astronomy & Space Science (CASS) once the AAO moves to its new premises at North Ryde. The joint AAO/CASS colloquia, Southern Cross Conference Series, and other regular forms of interaction should continue, with the AAO being proactive in ensuring these are well attended (by, for example, providing transportation between the two sites). Prof. Diamond (Chief of CASS) indicated strong support for such initiatives, including his willingness to share costs on any agreed arrangement.

### **Integration of the AAO into DIISR**

The Committee is impressed at the progress made in integrating the AAO into the Department's systems and processes, noting that a significant amount of effort and imagination were required from both institutions. It applauds the progress and approach taken so far and encourages the process to be completed in the same spirit.

### **Allocation of time on the AAT**

The Committee recommends revising the process proposed for the recruitment of new members to the Australian Time Assignment Committee, whereby ATAC itself is responsible for identifying and recommending new members to the Director. Instead, it recommends a process whereby the Director issues an open call to the astronomy community, soliciting nominations for ATAC membership. AAOAC would then be happy to provide the Director with comments and advice on his recommendations for ATAC membership, drawn from those nominated and any others he feels the Observatory needs to engage.

### **Sale of AAT nights to the Korean Astronomy & Space Institute (KASI)**

The Committee supports the sale of AAT nights to KASI but indicated that the strategic importance (e.g. the link with GMT) needs to be articulated to the community. It would be advisable if the Director did this in the AAO Observer, with a report in a subsequent issue of the Observer from the KASI astronomers on the science undertaken with their AAT time.

### **Public outreach and education**

The Committee is very supportive of greater use of the AAT/UKST as an attraction for public visitors to SSO and encourages the AAO to think of new ways of facilitating the 'visitor experience' at SSO. The question was raised whether Questacon could play a role in the AAO outreach program, particularly in managing it.

### **Key Performance Indicators**

The Committee offers the following advice on both existing and new KPIs for the AAO:

- The AAO should, where and when possible, benchmark itself against other comparable astronomy institutions/observatories.

- The level of international collaboration in the use of the AAT is a valuable KPI that is currently recorded and should be reported in future, with the appropriate statistics.
- The level of leveraging of external instrumentation funds, the number of such instruments built, and the number of telescope nights they each generate, are suggested as quantitative KPIs that can be used for the AAO's instrumentation program and should reflect well on the AAO.
- The AAO needs KPIs in the area of education and outreach. These should include the numbers of postgraduate students co-supervised to successful completion, plus the number of outreach lectures, events and media releases that are attributed to the AAO.

### **AAO Forward Look**

The Committee fully endorses the Director's proposal to embark on an *AAO Forward Look* planning exercise that will develop strategies to deal with the challenges and opportunities confronting the Observatory over the next 5-10 years. It provides the following advice on the process for developing this plan and consulting the astronomy community:

- It is essential that AAO have a strategy for success whether Australia joins the European Southern Observatory (ESO) or not.
- Consultations with the astronomy community should include a web-based wiki to allow astronomers to provide comments and ideas.
- The process should include consultation with the Secretary of DIISR.
- AAO should note the possibility of the Minister launching the *Forward Look* plan.

### **EIF funding for upgrade of the UKST**

The Committee is strongly of the view that the AAO should try and work together with the ANU on the planned bid to the next 'regional' EIF round for funding to upgrade facilities (including the UKST) at Siding Spring Observatory. Furthermore, any bid needs to be sensibly scaled to the size of the available EIF funds. The AAOAC does, however, realize that there are risks associated with such a joint bid. If it is around the \$20M mark, this could have a significant opportunity cost in terms of reducing the community's chances of having higher priority items (in particular, 8-metre telescope access) funded down the track. The AAOAC recommends that the AAO tread cautiously, first seeking further advice on this next EIF round from DIISR, as well as talking to ANU to get a clear understanding of what their detailed plans for their bid are. This information should then be used to inform a final decision on how to proceed.

### **Capital funding and grant initiatives**

The Committee is strongly of the view that with the AAO's funding now secure and at healthy levels, the way is clear for it to be considerably more ambitious in its scientific outlook, and it should be more adventurous in taking on new initiatives in research and instrumentation. It is strongly encouraged to maintain and develop further its 'blue sky' R&D activities, with the Committee being particularly impressed with the future potential of many of the ideas that have been developed by the Instrument Science group. Furthermore, the capital funding mechanism should be used to leverage new opportunities in this and the instrumentation area. The OH suppression technology developed as part of the GNOSIS instrument will be a real game-changer in infrared astronomy, and the AAO should exploit this to the hilt.

### **Risk management**

For a national facility as vital as the AAO, a robust and dynamic risk management plan is essential. AAO's General Manager advised that the AAO has a risk management strategy that will be updated in June as part of the Divisional Business Plan, and this could serve as the basis for a regular report to the Committee. It was felt that to facilitate discussion at the Committee, the report might focus on the top 10 risks to AAO operations being addressed by AAO management, including both the level of risk and mitigation strategy for each.