ASTRONOMY GRANTS PANEL 2013

Report by the Chairman to the Community

This is the final community report by the outgoing chairman. My apologies that it is coming so late. As before, please see this as a brief informal and personal report by the chairman on behalf of the panel members - official statements and guidance come from STFC. Welcome to Ian Smail as the incoming chair and to Dan Brown his deputy.

KEY POINTS

BACKGROUND
This was the third year under the new consolidated grant scheme. As in the last two years, we therefore made no major changes in policy or procedure. Just about the only new thing in 2013 was the requirement to provide data management plans, which the community did very well.

GRANTS RECEIVED
This round was distinctly smaller than both 2012 and 2011. In large part this was due to smaller (and also shorter duration) "bridging" requests in the previous rounds, which were required to consolidate all STFC grant-funded activities at a single institution into a single round. Hence, we received 20 applications (c.f. 27 last year and 35 the year before). These 20 applications contained 160 distinct projects, including 447 staff years of RA and Technician posts (so 49 FTEs average), and requesting a total of £53M, a factor of roughly 2.0 more than STFC could afford. As in the last two years, the overbidding factor compared to existing baseline had a large range, roughly from 1 to 4. So no sign yet of overbidding calming down!

HOW IT WORKS
There was no major change in procedure from last year, but we feel it's worth repeating the explanation. We allocated projects to one or more of the sub-panels - Astronomy Observation (AO), Astronomy Theory (AT), Solar Science (SS), and Planetary Science (PL). As in previous years, every application had multiple reviewer reports, and an "Introducer", who writes an initial report before the panel meetings, and co-ordinates additional "Assessor's Questions". The sub-panels then met in two sessions - AO/AT together, then SS/PL together - lasting a total of 5 days. The AGP chair and deputy chair attended all the meetings. Before the meetings, all sub-panel members provided initial scores, but only the chairs saw these.

At the meetings, each project was discussed in turn, and then given a final score and ranking around the table. As you might expect, when it became obvious that a project was near the bottom or near the top, discussion was accelerated, so that we could spend most of the time near the middle - but every project was considered fully.

A subset of the AGP then met as the "merging panel" for a further two days. Selected projects were cross-read by members from the other pair of panels in order to agree the relative ranking of the two initial lists. This process resulted in a small but definite re-scaling of the rankings. We are therefore very confident that AO/AT and SS/PL sides have been treated fairly.

The final output from AGP was a recommendation for a ranked ordering of projects. To help us arrive at that ranked list we used, as in previous years, a scoring system based on the categories mandated STFC-wide, and explained in the official guidelines. Each category was scored 0-5, with each grade defined by a standard wording such as "competitive with the best science funded worldwide". Our internal scoring scheme was slightly adjusted this year to give a better division into importance of the science, international competitiveness, and the quality of the plan for achieving the science.
Note that this temporary scoring system is only used for internal discussion; the actual result is an agreed ranking order.

FINANCE
The AGP does not hold a budget; we produce recommendations based on a ranked list, and STFC work down the list until they run out of money. We usually have a rough idea of the funding context, which, following the significant last-minute cuts of a few years back has been stable for the last few years: roughly speaking STFC have £9M of new funding to commit each year. However, over the last few years, various internal effects within STFC and RCUK has meant that in fact somewhat more (£10-11M) has been used for grants. Also, to smooth the cycle imbalance (see below) STFC are moving some money between rounds, so that a baseline of £10.5M should be available for 2014.

RESULTS
In total AGP recommended support for 73 posts, including RAs and Technicians. (That number represents average FTEs over the three year period). We also recommended 20 FTEs of Investigator time. The number of academics requesting support was 165, of which we supported 115 at some level. We followed our published guidelines of recommending 20% FTE on average for a major involvement in a project, and smaller amounts for secondary involvements. There were also some successful "FEC only" requests. The net result can be looked at two ways. The typical Investigator time amount per funded academic was 18%; but the average amount of Investigator time per RA+Tech post is 27%.

After the results, we made a careful analysis of results by science area, by geographical area, and facility use. There are no obvious trends, popular facilities still produce science past their funded missions/operations and resources are definitely supporting the exploitation of STFC's and UKSA's facility investments.

The big growth area this year was New Applicant proposals - probably not a surprise given the timing with respect to REF. There were 7 distinct applications, containing 14 projects, of which 9 were funded to at least some degree. On the other

hand, this year there was only one Consortium proposal, which was not successful. Over the three years of the scheme it has become reasonably clear that Consortium and New Applicant proposals are successful at about the same rate as other proposals, but of course they have their own risks and rewards!

How does the success rate compare to previous rounds? This is a little subtle, as there are different ways of looking at this and the bridging awards (to help people with the transition between rolling grants and consolidation) need to be correctly accounted for. (i) We could compare results to existing holdings. On this basis, groups in the 2013 round grew slightly, compared to 2012 with a flat result and 2011 (when a large number of new groups applied) with a cut. However, the groups that applied this year last applied in 2010, at an absolute minimum in grant funding. Making a rough attempt to correct for this (not simple) more or less removes this apparent imbalance. (ii) We could compare success rate to request. The fraction of applicants funded this round is only slightly increased (73% vs 59% and 61% for 2011 and 2012). (iii) or finally looking at the number of funded PDRA posts per funded applicant, that has been extremely stable at 65% across all three rounds. Overall, we feel that any real cycle imbalance has been fairly modest.

HIGH PERFORMANCE COMPUTING (HPC)

The handling of HPC has settled down, and was well handled by the community, but it remains unclear how DIRAC operations will be funded in the future, so do stay alert on this issue.

INVESTIGATOR TIME

Over the last few years, AGP has "kept a lid" on the level of Investigator Time funded under the FEC scheme. As the cuts bit, we felt this was necessary in order to protect RA-supported research, but we are keenly aware that levels are low, and that a number of excellent scientists are not being funded at all. We should all be prepared to explain to our administrations that FEC funding is not a good measure of research activity. There is also now a feeling, expressed by Science Board, that the overall funding in this area is too low.

CYCLE IMBALANCE

The volume imbalance in 2011, 12, 13 (35, 27, 20 applications) was a simple consequence of merging the old rolling grant and standard grant schemes. Hence there were bridging requests, which inflated the 2011/12 round numbers, but which will not return. In addition, despite being given the choice to delay, almost all groups holding standard grants chose to come into the scheme as early as possible. As discussed above, when you allow for history, the last three years has in fact been fair between rounds, and apparently, the success rates are not so different. However, there may still be a future issue, as any slight remaining volume imbalance is now frozen in. STFC is making an attempt to improve this situation by re-profiling some funds between the grants rounds.

REVIEW of CONSOLIDATED GRANTS SCHEME
As most of you will have noticed from the recent Astrocommunity email, the long promised review of the Consolidate Grants scheme is now under way. Input is expected to be channelled through the PIs of grants and is due by the end of March. Ian is representing AGP on the STFC panel, chaired by Alan Heavens.

INFORMAL REVIEW of PATHWAYS to IMPACT
There is also an informal low-key internal review of Pathways to Impact under way - no big changes expected but might make some tweaks. This does not have a consultation process, but I dare say if *useful* comments were to find their way to the AGP or STFC they might be relevant.

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