

ATUC Report to the Director, May 2008

This meeting of the AT Users Committee was held at ATNF Headquarters, Marsfield, on 7 and 8 May 2008. The meeting included an open session on the morning of Wednesday 7 May, and business sessions from 14:00 to 17:00 on 7 May and 08:30 to 12:30 on 8 May.

ATUC members also had a tour of the ATNF labs on 7 May to look at some of the technology developments currently in progress for ASKAP. We thank Dave de Boer and his colleagues for arranging this very interesting and informative visit.

Attendance: Elaine Sadler (Chair), Stacy Mader (Secretary), Kate Brooks, Melanie Johnston-Hollitt (8 May only), George Hobbs, Sarah Burke (student member), Sarah Maddison (8 May only), Stuart Ryder, Andrew Walsh.

Apologies: Emma Kirby, Rachel Webster,

The Chair welcomed Stacy Mader as the new ATUC secretary, and thanked him for his efforts in organizing this ATUC meeting. The Chair also expressed ATUC's thanks to the previous secretary, Michael Dahlem, for his hard work and many contributions over the past two years.

At the conclusion of the meeting, the Chair thanked retiring ATUC members Kate Brooks, Melanie Johnston-Hollitt, Stuart Ryder, Rachel Webster and student members Sarah Burke and Emma Kirby.

Date and format of the next meeting:

The next ATUC meeting is due in November 2008. No date has been set at this stage because we expect a significant turnover in membership before the next meeting, and will need to set the date in consultation with the incoming members.

Commendations and successes

- ATUC commends those involved in organising the recent very successful SKA Pathfinders meeting and SKA Forum in Perth.
- We congratulate the ATNF team responsible for the impressive achievements of the new digital filterbanks at Parkes (and now being exported to other observatories).
- ATUC was pleased to note the installation of a 7mm receiver at Mopra, and thanks those responsible.
- ATUC congratulates the organisers of the recent Mopra training day, which was seen as very successful by those who attended.
- ATUC members congratulate Shaun Amy and colleagues on the Internet2 IDEA award.
- ATUC thanks the members of the ATNF leadership team who visited university groups around the country in March and April as part of the 'Future Operations Roadshow'. This was seen as a valuable exercise which improved communication between the ATNF and users at a grassroots level.

Elaine Sadler (ATUC Chair)

ATUC Recommendations [ATNF response requested]

Matters arising from the November 2007 ATUC report and the Director's response

General issues:

1. In recognition of the new ATNF operational structure, ATUC request clarification about who it would be most effective to report to in future. While we are happy to have several members of the AT leadership team attend the final part of our meeting, it is also important for us to have a single point of contact within the new structure.
2. ATUC asks that the “commendations and successes” noted in its reports be passed on individually to the people concerned.

Specific issues:

3. ATUC welcomes the initiative to automate the scheduling of all ATNF telescopes.
4. ATUC notes the success of the recent Mopra training day. Several issues raised in the last ATUC report (points 5, 8 & 9) were addressed at that meeting. ATUC will review these in six months time to check on progress.
5. ATUC asks that resources be allocated to developing the ASAP software in line with the user needs identified at the Mopra training day.
6. On page 4, paragraph 8 of the ATNF Future Operations Document, ATUC requests clarification on what is meant by “major instrumentation”. Does this preclude future LIEF grants for new ATNF instrumentation? Within the new ATNF management structure, who is responsible for coordinating LIEF grants?
7. Information about the correct form of acknowledgement of data obtained using ATNF telescopes is still too deeply embedded within the ATNF web pages, and remains difficult to find. ATUC suggests the information contained in the OPAL user-guide be moved to a more visible location (i.e. under OPAL page sidebar, as “Publications and Acknowledgements links”). There should also be a link to this information on the ATOA site front page.

New recommendations:

Instrumentation – Water Vapor Radiometers

8. ATUC is encouraged by the progress outlined in the WVR report, but the required level of resources and the continuing lack of an identified project scientist leaves us concerned about whether the mid-2009 timeline can be achieved. ATUC suggests that

knowledgeable scientists from other institutions involved with WVRs could be asked to help.

Compact Array and Mopra issues

9. ATUC acknowledges the delay with installing the full CABB system. We note that this should have minimal impact on observers in the current semester, who will be using the single-frequency interim CABB system. The next call for proposals should include a statement outlining the shutdown expected.
10. ATUC were pleased to hear the announcement of the 8th Imaging Synthesis School in September. We recommend that this be announced via the ASA and ATCA-based email exploders as soon as possible.
11. ATUC request that ATNF also consider holding a single-dish school at one of the Observatories, similar to the Mopra Induction Course held in 2005. This would fulfil a similar role to the Synthesis School by covering all aspects of observing and data reduction with Parkes, Mopra and other single-dish radiotelescopes.

Parkes

12. ATUC asks that users be informed about delays to the new 13mm receiver. In particular, the status should be made clear in the upcoming call for proposals in the next semester.

Tidbinbilla

13. ATUC thanks Shinji Horiuchi for sending a report on Tidbinbilla observations. We were pleased to hear that astronomy observations with the 70-m telescope have restarted after an 18-month gap.
14. ATUC asks that the Tidbinbilla projects status web pages be updated as projects are started and/or completed. We would also like information on who is now the ATNF contact for Tidbinbilla operations.
15. ATUC requests clarification from ATNF on the position of Tidbinbilla in the new operations model.

National Facility Office

16. With regard to future science priorities with Parkes, ATCA, Mopra and Tidbinbilla, ATUC is keen to see user input included in any revision of the Future ATNF Operations (FAO) document.
17. ATUC are enthusiastic about the proposed Science Planning Road-show.

18. ATUC understands the following timeline applies to the next stage of future operations planning:

- a. End of May: Joint ATNF/ATUC summary of feedback on v1 of FAO
- b. Mid June: ATNF response to feedback – how will this be communicated to the community?
- c. Early July(?) Release of three key science papers (v1) Will a presentation at the upcoming ASA meeting be made?
- d. Mid July: Science Roadshow. Will this include an open web forum?
- e. End July: Version 2 of the FAO document – will there be further consultation before submission to CSIRO?
- f. End July: Version 2 of the three key science papers. Will there be further consultation before submission?
- g. September: Submission of FAO document to CSIRO

ATUC requests that all documents be made available for comment in early August before final submission.

19. ATUC members are willing to participate in the preparation of the three key science planning papers. ATUC recommends these be made available before the Science Planning Road-show begins so that informed feedback can be provided.

20. ATUC notes the role of Duty Astronomers requires further clarification in the new Operational Model. Some detailed comments on this issue, and on the related issue of the allocation of Director's time, are given at the end of this report. We welcome a response from ATNF.

Proposed TAC changes

21. ATUC share ATNF's concerns on the current workload on TAC members. However, we believe that changes to the current TAC system should only be made after wider discussion with the community, with more than one option offered for consideration (e.g. split ATCA/Mopra proposals, review other observatory models). ATUC are concerned that the specific model presented to us may not in fact reduce the workload of TAC members.

22. ATUC also notes that technical assessment of proposals is an essential part of the TAC process. We have heard of at least one recent program in which the observers only discovered after arriving at the telescope that their planned observations were not technically feasible.

ATNF co-supervised students

23. ATUC welcomes the degree of flexibility available in the management of co-supervised students, as outlined in the open session of our meeting. We request that the relevant web pages be updated to reflect this.

24. ATUC seeks clarification on the documentation requirements and review process of ATNF students. The process for accepting students should be made as transparent and streamlined as possible. Sarah Maddison is happy to discuss this further with relevant ATNF people.

Software/computing

25. ATUC recommends that the science planning process now underway should also take into account the resources needed/available to develop essential scientific software such as ASAP, ATCA Sched, MIRIAD and pulsar software. We ask that Mark Weiringa give a presentation on this at our next meeting.

ASKAP/SKA issues

26. ATUC welcomes the engagement of the community in the planning of a user policy for ASKAP. It would be valuable to draw on experience from others who have formulated policies and participated on large projects at other telescopes.

New ATUC members – ATSC issues

27. Up to five new ATUC members, plus two student members will need to be appointed before our next meeting. Since we are part-way through reviewing the future operations issues, it may be appropriate to extend the terms of one or two of the retiring members to retain some continuity and the ATUC Chair will discuss this with the ATSC Chair.
28. We note that the ATSC or its successor will need to identify a new ATUC chair in the near future.
29. ATUC has been asked to clarify the role of student members. It is important to note that they attend ATUC meetings to represent the views of students, rather than senior astronomers at their home institution. We will ask the ATSC to make sure that that this is clear in the letter of appointment.
30. ATUC suggests that it would be valuable to have an international member attend our meetings on a more formal basis, especially as we move towards discussing user policy for ASKAP. This is another issue we would like to discuss with the ATSC.

Additional comments on the future of the Duty Astronomer program and Allocation of Director's time (summarized by Melanie Johnston-Hollitt, University of Tasmania).

The impact on the current Duty Astronomer (DA) program of moving to an SOC observing model needs to be carefully considered by the ATNF. In particular, ATUC are anxious to ensure that the advantages of the DA program are retained. Aside from the training benefits for ATNF students and junior staff, there is also significant incentive for

more experienced ATNF staff and, with approval, experienced radio astronomers from other institutions to act as Duty Astronomers in the present arrangement, which offers several advantages:

- ATNF paid travel from the home Australian institution to Sydney & Narrabri,
- Training in radio astronomy techniques,
- Interaction with ATNF staff and students, *and*
- Preferential access to Director's time on the ATCA.

The first three aspects should not be affected in the move to the new ATNF operations model. However, access to Director's time on the ATCA needs further consideration in the new model. At present the ATNF website suggests that Director's time will be allocated in the following order:

1. The ATNF Director's discretion, and an allocation reserved in advance
2. Telescope tests and repairs (other than routine maintenance),
3. Target of opportunity and NAPA observations,
4. Observations by the duty astronomer (Narrabri only)
5. Observations by staff astronomers,
6. Observations by other astronomers on site at the time
7. Requests for remote observing (Narrabri only) and other requests

This in principle gives the Duty Astronomer priority access over other users, including ATNF staff. In practice, competition for Director's time is likely to increase when remote observing from an SOC becomes common, and it will become particularly easy for Sydney-based ATNF staff to request unallocated slots on the ATCA.

Recent comments from student DAs to ATUC members suggest that unallocated Director's time requested by the DA is already being given preferentially to ATNF staff (either on-site or remote) instead. In an SOC model the number of requests for Director's time is expected to increase, and so it is vitally important that the ATNF consider how to preserve this key benefit of the DA program. The increased requests are likely to be across the board and not just from ATNF staff, e.g. one can imagine an international observer coming to the SOC to use Parkes might notice unallocated time on the ATCA and make a request.

Scientific cross-fertilization of this kind is good (and one of the reasons to move to an SOC model). ATUC in no way wishes to discourage this, but it should not come at the expense of the current practice. In particular, access to unallocated time for PhD students is often vital to getting them through their degrees on time and with the move to 6 month terms this is more important now than in the past.

Additionally, a more detailed model of how the Duty Astronomer program will function in the SOC model needs to be developed. If DAs are expected to have knowledge of all ATNF telescopes, for example, then an increased training period maybe needed. It is unclear at this stage to some members of the community how the ATNF foresees the

interaction of DAs, many of whom are students, with the instrument scientists, ATNF staff and observers. As with the situation with Mopra and DAs highlighted in ATUC's last report, clear expectations for the role of the DA will need to be drawn up and made available to ATNF staff, students and all observers.

In summary, the community enthusiastically wishes to see the DA program continue and flourish, and we would like to see further details of how the ATNF plans to continue this program. Since this program plays such an important role in our graduate training, members of the community would be happy to assist the ATNF with further developing or discussing the scheme if required.