

An important message to UKIRT users: UKIRT and the STFC Programmatic Review

This note contains some essential information for UKIRT operations in semesters 08A and 08B. It also encourages the entire user community, both inside and outside the UK, to respond to the consultation opportunity for the STFC Programmatic Review.

Contents:

1. Background
2. 08A programmes
3. 08B Call for Proposals
4. Response to the consultation exercise
5. Conclusion

Background

For those not familiar with the funding situation in the UK, here is a brief summary. In 2007, the funding body for astronomy, PPARC, was merged with another research council and part of a third to form a new body, the Science and Technology Facilities Council (STFC). Shortly after its creation, the STFC initiated a Programmatic Review, with the objective of reviewing its entire programme and ranking all commitments in priority order.

In the autumn, the STFC's financial allocation from government for the 3-year period starting 1st April 2008 was announced. The net result, once earmarked commitments are subtracted, is a deficit of £80M. Substantial funding cuts are required and there will be considerable pain throughout the programme. The Programmatic Review therefore took on additional significance as the process which would provide the scientific guidance as to where the cuts should fall.

The outcome of the Programmatic Review was recently made public for consultation with the community. The consultation document can be seen here:

http://www.scitech.ac.uk/stfconsultation/sources/STFC_PR2008.pdf.

We are dismayed to have to report that, despite its high productivity and impact and the consequent high profile for UK astronomy, UKIRT was ranked in the lowest of the four priority groups. Ordinarily, this outcome would lead directly to closure of the facility, but STFC have recognised that there are mitigating circumstances which dictate against such precipitate action at this time.

08A Programmes

The consultation document states

"We plan to move UKIRT to 100% survey mode as soon as possible starting 1 April 2008."

The Board has conferred to consider the implications of this statement, and has adopted the position that, since this is a consultation exercise, it would be inappropriate for the observatory to change its operational plans at the present time. Hence, the current position is that **all approved UKIRT 08A programmes will proceed as planned**. This includes, *inter alia*, the Cassegrain block scheduled for July. The situation will be reviewed when STFC's final programme is developed following the consultation exercise.

08B Call for Proposals

UKIRT's Call for Proposals for 08B observing programmes was issued on 15th February, and the proposal deadline is 15th March, i.e., within the consultation period. The Board has again decided that it would be inappropriate to change the observatory's scientific programme in response to a consultation document. Hence, the current position is that **the 08B Call for Proposals remains unchanged** and we encourage applications for the entire suite of capabilities. The call specified that Cassegrain mode would be offered in August 2008, December 2008 and January 2009. The situation will, again, be reviewed when STFC's final programme is developed following the consultation exercise. We appreciate that the uncertainty makes it difficult for users to plan their research programmes, but we strongly recommend that you submit your proposals nevertheless.

Response to the Consultation Exercise

The consultation exercise is described here:

<http://www.scitech.ac.uk/stfcconsultation/comment.aspx>

The continued operation of UKIRT is under threat, and **we therefore encourage all recent, present and potential users of UKIRT to submit their views**. This is an exercise in which weight of numbers may well be important.

The Board and the UKIDSS consortium are both planning to submit detailed statements to the consultation; the latter will argue for continued operation of the telescope in order to complete the UKIDSS survey programme. In sending this message to the entire user community, we particularly encourage submissions from users who are interested in access to the entire range of UKIRT instrumentation. The proposal demand for the Cassegrain instruments remains healthy, new modes including coronagraphic imaging and polarimetry and full-field thermal infrared imaging are in their infancy, and WFCAM is in demand for non-survey science; it is vitally important that these constituencies make themselves heard.

The consultation is open to anyone from inside or outside the UK. UKIRT has, since its inception, been open to proposals from any country and the TAG awards time on the basis of scientific merit. UKIRT's unique capabilities (e.g., in polarimetry) regularly attract a number of international proposals each semester. We therefore strongly encourage submissions to the consultation exercise from non-UK users who value the capabilities offered by UKIRT.

Conclusion

The outcome of the Programmatic Review was surprising and disappointing for UKIRT. The Board and the Observatory intend to respond fully and constructively to the consultation opportunity, and we thank the community of users for assisting us in this. We will endeavour to keep the community informed of developments.

Professor Gary Davis, Director
Professor Pat Roche, Board Chairman
10th March 2008