

Report on the JCMT Board meeting – December 2011

The most recent meeting of the JCMT Board took place 30 November – 1 December 2011 at the Joint Astronomy Centre, Hilo, Hawaii.

Operations and Instruments

The weather had been poor during the first half of this particular reporting period but had improved during the second half. The overall time loss due to the weather was 18.4%. ACSIS, RxA, HARP and RxWD had all been operating generally very well albeit with some minor faults. HARP continued to dominate the usage statistics as had been the trend in recent periods.

The last reporting period saw a technical fault rate of 4.7%, which was below the 5% target set by the Board. The fault rate was dominated by one major fault due to a problem with the N-S chop of the SMU. The problem was not identified immediately resulting in 31 hours being lost to this fault alone. Software was now in place to prevent a similar problem arising again in the future.

SCUBA-2

The Board warmly welcomed the JAC's acceptance of SCUBA-2 from the UK ATC on 30 September 2011. This represented a major milestone in the history of the JCMT and would pave the way for many new scientific discoveries. The Board received an update on the Phase 1 Science Verification programme, noting that this had been extremely helpful with the fine-tuning of the instrument and the JCMT Legacy Surveys themselves, and had provided some intriguing glimpses of the science that SCUBA-2 will enable. The Board has now embarked on an exercise to re-scope the JCMT Legacy Surveys in order to ensure that they are consistent with the current instrument performance. The output from this process is expected in early 2012.

It was with enormous pleasure that the Director showed the Board the image that would be used in the first SCUBA-2 press release. This image and other results from Science Verification would certainly demonstrate SCUBA-2's capability and were certain to excite the community who have been eagerly awaiting SCUBA-2.

The Board has previously recognized the efforts of all those involved with the project and in particular the staff at the JAC, who stepped in to undertake the commissioning of the instrument in the final stages. Their exceptional effort and dedication was highlighted again in the meeting and in the Staff Appreciation Dinner, held alongside the Board meetings.

Planning for the Future

The Board recognises that a secure funding environment is essential for the overall stability of the observatory and to allow SCUBA-2 to be fully exploited. In line with this,

the Board reviewed progress towards securing agreement from the funding partners on a long term extension to the JCMT agreement (noting that the NWO planned to withdraw from the partnership from March 2013). Informed by the on-sky performance of SCUBA-2, the Director is presenting a strong case to the Agencies and decisions are expected in Spring 2012. The Board will continue to support the Director's work in this area, and will continue to press for clarity on plans in a timely way.

With the long-term future of the observatory in mind, Professor Walter Gear, Cardiff University, was invited to present the results of a study, commissioned by the Director, of the scientific case for continuation and development of the JCMT into the 2020s, and the corresponding options for facility development. The Board welcomed Professor Gear's summary of the study group's initial conclusions, and agreed that there were realistic prospects for the JCMT continuing as a world-leading observatory with relatively modest investment in the facility and new instruments. Several areas were noted for more detailed assessment and study over the coming months. The Board also noted that in early December the study group's report would be presented at a community meeting in Edinburgh to discuss the UK's long-term strategy for submillimetre astronomy, and JCMT's role in that strategy. Similar discussions are due to be held in Canada in the near future and will also be an important contribution to the longer-term planning for the observatory.

Finally, the Board once again welcomed the opportunity to meet with staff around the fringes of the Board meeting and at the Staff Appreciation Dinner. The Board was particularly pleased to see SCUBA-2 data being displayed so impressively in the planetarium show at the 'Imiloa Center. As ever, the Board wishes to thank the JAC staff for their warm welcome during its annual visit to the JAC and for their continued dedication and professionalism. These efforts ensure that the JCMT remains at the forefront of world astronomy.

Ms M Cooper (JCMT Board Secretary)