

WORKING GROUP FOR THE WORLDWIDE DEVELOPMENT OF ASTRONOMY

(GROUPE DE TRAVAIL POUR LE DEVELOPPEMENT MONDIAL DE L'ASTRONOMIE)

Report of Meeting held on Friday, 26th July, 1991

Chairman: A.H. Batten

About 30 IAU members, representing some 15 countries, attended the meeting. The Chairman pointed out that most of the countries joining the Union since the end of the Second World War were newly independent with little or no tradition of modern scientific research. The astronomical communities in these countries are often small, isolated, and without the facilities and funds that many of us take for granted, even in times of restricted funding. These considerations led the Executive Committee to form the Working Group, whose present membership - in addition to the Chairman - comprises Kippenhahn, Kozai, Léna and Sahade. This is the first General Assembly at which the Group could hold an open meeting. The Chairman hoped that the meeting would make members of the Union aware of the Group, and provide an opportunity for those we wish to help to express their needs. The first part of the meeting would provide a survey of what the IAU is already doing, and the second would be devoted to local initiatives already being taken, independently of the IAU.

F.G. Smith spoke of the travel grants provided by Commission 38 (Exchange of Astronomers) to established astronomers making temporary working visits to countries other than their own. Clear, simple guidelines enable individual decisions to be made quickly. Grants to graduate students (e.g. to make observing trips) are not permitted by the guidelines. It might be better to try to find funds for such purposes by pointing out the need to various national academies, rather than by attempting to expand the IAU's own programme to include other kinds of visits than those for which it was instituted.

A. Sandquist summarized several programmes of Commission 46 (Teaching of Astronomy), particularly the Visiting Lecturer's Programmes (VLP), the International Schools for Young Astronomers (ISYA), the travelling telescope, the Newsletter (listing educational materials) and the IAU Colloquium of three years ago: The Teaching of Astronomy. The value of both the travelling telescope and VLPs was questioned in discussion, but there were also strong advocates of each of them. The value of experience with even small telescopes to students in countries that have

none at all was stressed. The travelling telescope could provide such experience. It was suggested that the IAU might compile a central register of small instruments, no longer used, that established observatories might be prepared to give away or at least to make available on long-term loan. Discussion of VLPs centred round the difficulty of getting lecturers for three-month terms. Some participants thought that shorter more intensive courses might overcome this difficulty, but most felt that the longer interaction between teacher and students, permitted by the three-month courses, was valuable. D.L. Wentzel spoke of his concerns that both VLPs and ISYAs were often too dependent on one individual in the host institution, and that a mechanism for assessing the lasting effects of these operations is needed.

G.A. Wilkins spoke of the concern of Commission 5 (Documentation and Astronomical Data) for all member countries of the Union. He discussed such initiatives as J. Mead's Selected Astronomical Catalogs on CD-ROM. It was emphasized that the IAU has made a grant to defray the costs of distributing this to small institutions in developing countries, and that the equipment needed to read the disks is relatively inexpensive. The difficulty of communicating with these small institutions was discussed. Wilkins thought that Commission 5 could advise them on how to link themselves to e-mail networks. Onuora said that in Nigeria communication had been improved by association with a specific institution.

The importance of introducing astronomy teaching into secondary schools, where it could serve as a paradigm for all science teaching, was stressed. However, it is clearly impracticable for the IAU to reach all the world's secondary-school teachers. One IAU lecture in a developing country, even if given to school teachers, is of limited value. Moreover, the IAU's prime function is to encourage research in astronomy. Nevertheless, there was a strong feeling that we should try to influence education at secondary-school level, and even at the popular level. One proposal was for an exhibition of all the world's astronomy text-books at the XXII GA.

The local initiatives and problems discussed in the second part of the meeting included the Inter-University Centre for Astronomy and Astrophysics at Pune, India (Narlikar), teaching astronomy in the Asian-Pacific region (Isobe), the situation of astronomers in China (Li Qi Bin) and the Soviet Astronomical Society (Bochkarev). Wamsteker also discussed the proposed World Astronomy Days that would provide access to modern instrumentation to astronomers that do not normally have it. The audience present expressed its support for the concept.

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