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The view from abroad

Virginia Trimble offers a perspective on the RAS from the point of view of a long-standing international Fellow.

The RAS I joined in 1969 was, and still is in some ways, the most international of the large, nation-based astronomical entities, still including about one-third foreign members versus the current 10–15% for the American Astronomical Society (AAS) and the Astronomische Gesellschaft (AG).

Membership benefits for a Cambridge resident in those days included paper copies of *The Observatory* and *The Quarterly Journal of the RAS* and the invaluable Directory and List of Members of blessed memory (deceased 2002), plus eight meetings a year in London involving a nice train ride down and back with colleagues. A subset of participants, called the RAS Dining Club, also got a good meal, while the rest of us could attend the opera or a concert and still catch the last train back, with a place to sleep on Valerie Myerscaugh's apartment floor if we missed that train.

Many things have changed in the intervening 49 years, and there are other traits in which the RAS is not particularly outward-looking (set out in table 1). Some reasonable questions in 2018 might include: (1) Is the membership likely to remain widely distributed? (2) Do the UK-resident Fellows want it to be so (that is, what does the RAS gain from us)? (3) What changes might help to keep it so? Consideration of the answers to these questions might also make the Society look more attractive to resident astronomers and geoscientists.

Distribution of membership

First, looking ahead at future membership, of the 651 new Fellows announced in *A&G* in the past couple of years, only 58 (8.6%) have foreign addresses. The largest number come from the US (nine); Australia, China, Germany, India, Ireland and Spain supply five each; there are three from Canada; pairs from the Netherlands, Sweden and South Africa; and singletons from Chile,

France, Hungary, New Zealand, Saudi Arabia and Singapore.

These figures are not quite as ominous as they sound, because, on the basis of those in the last, 2002, Directory, a large fraction of current overseas members had joined when they were students, postdocs, sabbatical visitors and so forth in the UK, and retained their memberships when they left or returned home. Thus the future foreign membership will depend a good deal on what those other UK-resident 585 do in their later careers. But I suspect that fewer than one third of them (161) will leave the UK and retain their RAS Fellowships for many years. In addition, the rate of selection of new foreign Honorary Fellows (roughly equivalent to the former foreign associates) seems to have slowed.

Another broader trend probably threatens overseas RAS Fellowship numbers, at least from the USA. This is the decline in membership of societies that are not one's "primary professional society". For example, membership of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and Sigma Xi, the Scientific Research Association is declining, in contrast with the American Astronomical Society, American Physical Society and American Chemical Society who are holding their own or growing. I belong to all five, and others as well. For Americans and probably also for astronomers elsewhere outside the UK, the RAS is not the "primary professional society".

What have we ever done for the RAS?

Second, do a majority of the (UK-resident) members want the RAS to remain fairly international? With the exception of bodies such as the Royal Society, the French Academy of Sciences or the US National Academy of Sciences, membership societies in general seem to feel that more is better, boosting the range of things they can do ("we lose money on every new student member, but make it up in volume") and the impact they can have, at home and abroad. The existence of an RAS International Committee suggests that the RAS values its international character, and that

we are part of The Plan. I have just volunteered for membership on that committee, and will gladly continue to pay emeritus dues, though also an Honorary Fellow.

It is perhaps a sign of the perceived benefits of international character, that the American Astronomical Society has recently instituted a new class of membership, international associate, with reduced dues but also reduced privileges. On the ominous side, a decade or two ago I tried to persuade several US-resident RAS Fellows to let me nominate them for Council. There were no takers, and the suggestion that one of them might nominate me fell on

equally unwilling ears, garnering responses such as, "Well, I'm not very interested in the RAS any more." In the absence of a paper membership directory – the AAS still has one, and I regard this as the primary benefit of membership – I do not know how many of these folks still pay dues (although I do know that some of them are dead).

Changes?

The third question is what might be done to maintain an international presence in the RAS, if that is desired? There are two paths: keeping the current overseas Fellows and recruiting new ones. On the retention side, the most obvious change would seem to be to devise meetings that are more accessible for international Fellows, in terms of the places, dates and durations and the opportunity to present talks and posters. Perhaps London is best, but summer meetings of more than one day might seem more attractive for those travelling to the UK. Some logistical changes would also help. Even the longer National Astronomy Meeting in the summer of 2013 in St Andrews was a tad inhospitable. The deadlines were set so that one had to pay the non-refundable registration and housing charges and, in practice, the air fares, before the programme was announced. When my abstract was rejected, I asked that my registration and room be turned over to a starving student who could otherwise not come – I do not know whether this ever happened. Alan Batten, who had been a student at St

1 Comparing three international astronomical societies

	Royal Astronomical Society	American Astronomical Society	Astronomische Gesellschaft
total membership	4000	7000	800
foreign membership	40.5% (2002) one-third (2017)	13.2% (1973) 10.5% (2017)	40% (1863–1918) 14% (1981–2013)
presidents: foreign-born	2/63 Dreyer and Plaskett	9/46	3/11 pre-WWII 1/22 post-WWII
presidents: resident abroad at time of service	0/63	0/46 (EM Burbidge became US citizen when elected; B Stromgren resigned when he returned to Denmark)	
councillors: non-resident	no	Canada and Mexico	numerous, including Eddington, Newcomb, JC Adams and residents of Sweden, Russia, Netherlands, Denmark, Italy, Switzerland, France
major prize winner: foreign-born	Gold Medal (1946–2017) 25/78	Russell Lecture (1946–2018) 28/70	Schwarzschild Lecture (1959–2017) 34/44
major prize winner: foreign resident at award year	50/78	8/70	37/44
meetings (post WWI): frequency, duration, locations	8/year (no summer) 1 day 7/year in London	2/year (January, June) 4 days all over US + Canada/Mexico	1/year (September) 4–5 days all over Germany and Switzerland, Austria and Czechoslovakia; pre-WWII also Hungary, Denmark, Netherlands, Sweden, Belgium
meetings: types of talks	prize, invited, contributed, special sessions, posters	prize, invited, contributed, posters (society and divisions)	invited, contributed, some posters, some special topics
meetings: additional fees for contributing	no	yes, \$487 (2017, reg. member)	yes
membership: fee	£115 regular £30 student, emeritus £75 early career	\$188 regular \$84 junior \$94 emeritus, educational, international	€75 regular €30 student, person of low income €50 retired
membership: signature required	one member or established astronomer	two full members	two current members
international committee	yes	no	no

Andrews and studied with Erwin Freundlich and had some very interesting things to say, also had his abstract rejected, but attended the meeting anyhow.

By way of comparison, the AAS and APS both have rules saying that every dues-paying member is entitled to give one short, contributed talk (or display a poster if preferred) at each of the two major, annual meetings. And as a council member of both AAS and APS over the years, I have fought to keep this rule, to the extent of volunteering to chair “crank sessions”. They are usually rather fun.

Reminders

As for keeping up the supply, RAS Fellows who provide address changes to foreign parts should be reminded of the advantages of retaining their Fellowships – and it would be an interesting exercise to list these – and urged to recruit their new

students and colleagues. My impression from the lists of new Fellows is that folks sometimes join in pairs or small clusters. This suggests that new overseas Fellows should be informed or reminded that they

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“The AAS and APS both have rules saying that all members may give a talk at major meetings”

can now be the member-sponsors for new Fellows and be encouraged to enroll some of their new associates. American Chemical Society members who bring in a friend or colleague are rewarded with a blanket showing the periodic table right up to $Z = 118$. An RAS equivalent might display the constellations.

Table 1 includes some other aspects of the RAS, AAS and AG, indicating that we are not the most international in all respects. I infer that the USA has long been a semi-domesticated elephant with a Hoover for a trunk, drawing in astronomers and other scientists from all over the world. It is also very hard on a country – and its scientific societies – to lose two wars. In the

aftermath of the second world war, AG was the IAU adhering organization for all of Germany from first membership in 1952 to 1963. Separate entities adhered for the East and West during 1963–94, and it is now the Rat Deutscher Sternwarten.

My gratitude to the RAS has a very personal aspect. All 10 campuses of the University of California classify their faculty into at least four levels of assistant professor, four levels of associate professor (with tenure), and 10 levels of full professor. To be promoted (the only way to get a significant salary increase) one must demonstrate some achievement – a big grant, election to society office, publication of a major, significant, first-author paper or a prize, for instance. Foreign Associateship in the RAS carried me from Professor IV to V, and I am now a Professor VIII, which is enough already. ●

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